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MARCH 2015 // ISSUE 407 // £3.99

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FOR RUGBY LEAGUE BUT IT
REQUIRES US TREATING IT AS MORE
THAN JUST THE LOCAL PASTIME."**

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CROWE'S WORLD VISION

GARETH WALKER hears the South Sydney owner's passionate stance on expanding the game

FOR A SMALL GROUP OF RUGBY LEAGUE journalists, it was an invite like no other before in this country. The chance to sit in on a preview screening of Russell Crowe's latest film before being able to put questions to the Hollywood A-lister and South Sydney co-owner.

Staged in a cinema close to Piccadilly Circus in London (inset right), the event came just three days before Crowe's Rabbitohs took on St Helens in this year's World Club Challenge.

The Q&A session was conducted by respected broadcaster and Rugby League supporter Clare Balding, though the questions on the sport Crowe has followed since childhood were put forward by the watching press.

And after 30 minutes of fascinating

responses, the answer of most interest came to the query: 'Why do you think Rugby League has not enjoyed the global spread the game deserves?'

Crowe embarked on a lengthy and passionate reply that covered this year's World Club Series and his own proposal to expand it, opportunities in America, and his view of the strengths of the sport.

This is his answer in full.

"I think it's partly got to do with us - I think we're very tribal, both here and in Australia," he explained.

"This is a process that is still going on, and I think that there's a big future for the game. It really is the most exciting ball-in-hand football game that exists. That's my opinion. It's a

very easy game to explain to Americans because of periods of defined defence and offence - far easier than rugby union is.

"It think as time goes on we have to begin to shape our game so that it generates more revenue and the athletes that we have that are interested in playing the game stay playing the game.

"The thing that we've made mistakes with in the past is that if you're going to introduce a sport to another country, it should only be at its highest level. Some of this World Series situation I disagree with, because we're into a mode of two or three games of friendlies.

"Since when does that work in a Rugby League vernacular? If there's not blood on



the line, it's not Rugby League. We've got the World Club Challenge and that's dead serious, and look, the other teams will take their games seriously as well, but they're not playing for anything.

"This is a kind of hybrid of an idea that I put forward a few years ago. If you can get to the point - and it requires changing international schedules and all that stuff - where you can play a different competition at the end of the ESL (European Super League) and NRL season that takes the top four from both that takes place on a neutral ground, everyone is playing for something.

"It means that the team that came fourth in the NRL are now at square one with everyone else, and they can win this. That's such a very important thing - the game is so intense, it can't be played in a pat-you-on-the-back jokey manner. It has to be blood on the line, dead serious - because that's what Rugby League is.

"It wouldn't even necessarily be knock-out. The Aussie guys (the Australian media present) have all the stuff I talked about a few years ago - at the time I had it all worked out with eight teams and 23 games I think it was. It was a serious thing, a full-on competition.

"I suggested the final in Vegas, and I only suggested that because it's an international hub - you can fly there from anywhere and it's halfway between the two countries.

"You guys do get a little bit of a leg-up with the World Club Challenge played here with the weather and once your season's actually begun. We know this.

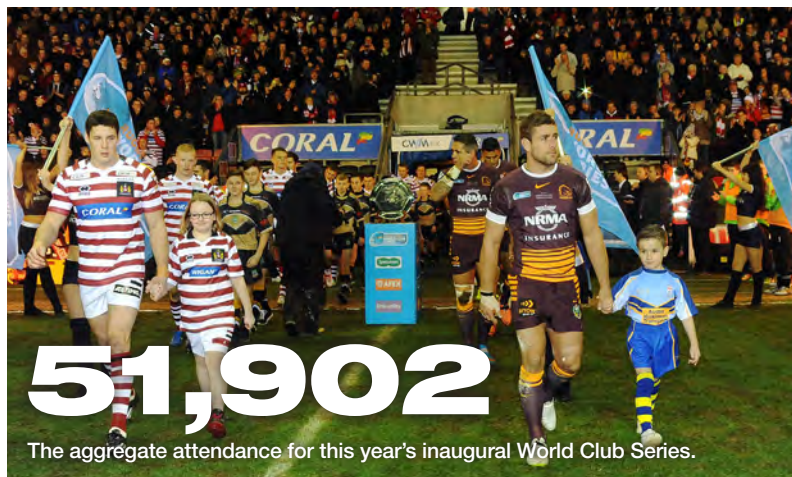
"I think there's a great future in front of Rugby League but it requires us treating it as more than just the local pastime. It's a professional sport and we've got a platform for our athletes where we can teach them to be the role models they want to be.

"Leave the tribalism in place - the tribalism is fantastic. Just spread the tribalism, make it okay for people to form their own tribes somewhere else. And take your best players there and show them how to play the game at the highest level. I think that's how you attract people."

Not long after, Crowe disappeared with his people into the London night. Three days later he would shun this year's Oscars ceremony in Hollywood to take his place in a Langtree Park box for the World Club Challenge main event.

Rugby League-wise, you get the impression Crowe isn't going anywhere. And the more the sport can use both his influence and vision, the better.

THE MONTH IN NUMBERS



12

The number of seconds on the clock when Willie Tonga was stretchered from the field on his Catalans debut against St Helens after colliding with Alex Walmsley.



Gareth Hock's latest suspension - three matches for each instance of using his knees in the 6-52 defeat against St Helens.

7,449

The crowd for Leigh's opening Championship match against Bradford Bulls, which the Centurions won 36-24.

34

The number of RL journalists, out of 42, that tipped Wakefield to finish bottom this season. The Wildcats won their opening two Super League matches in February.

1,305



The number of retweets, at the time of writing, given to Marwan Koukash's "I have had enough" tweet. He has since reaffirmed his commitment to Salford.

14

Sin binnings, including six at Leigh, on the second weekend of action this season.

WORDS: AARON BOWER

MYULTIMATEXIII

CASTLEFORD TIGERS HALFBACK BEN ROBERTS BEGINS A NEW SERIES REVEALING WHICH TEAMMATES PAST AND PRESENT HE WOULD PICK IN HIS OWN PERSONAL DREAM TEAM





1 Jarryd Hayne

PARRAMATTA EELS

"The guy is just freakish in every single way. He's a phenomenal athlete and a quite incredible talent who was just brilliant to play in the spine of a team with. He's one of those players who can just do anything on a Rugby League field, in attack and defence. Some of the tries he scores are incredible, and he'll be a big loss to the game when he goes to the NFL. If there's any player who could make that transition though I'm confident it would be him."

2 Antonio Winterstein

SAMOA

"Antonio is one of the most incredible finishers around. Playing with him on the wing for Samoa makes my job a little easier because he's just so good. Attacking-wise he's a real threat and a top talent who gives defences plenty of headaches whenever he's playing, whether it's in the NRL or at international level."

3 Willie Tonga

CANTERBURY BULLDOGS & MELBOURNE STORM

"Super League fans are going to see a lot of Willie this year at Catalans Dragons obviously, and they'll see quickly just how good he is. In defence he's such a demanding and imposing figure, and he runs so hard with the ball. He's a great player to have in your team no matter what level it's at. He's got great feet near that line, too."

4 Will Chambers

MELBOURNE STORM

"Will is one of those centres that just knows how to instinctively hit a hole in attack. He's a natural talent and he was great fun to play with at Melbourne Storm. He's a great bloke to boot, too."

5 Sisa Waqa

MELBOURNE STORM

"Sisa is very similar to Antonio in that he's just such a threat. He's been really enjoyable to play with and he's a freak when he's got the ball in his hands. As well as that, Sisa is really reliable under the high ball, which can help to take the pressure off the rest of the team - he's as safe as houses!"

6 Cooper Cronk

MELBOURNE STORM

"Cooper is such a great organiser of a team, and when he plays well the rest of the team just seems to follow suit. He's a real general to have in your side and he creates such a positive influence with his devastating kicking game. I couldn't look past Cooper for this position."

7 Trent Hodkinson

CANTERBURY BULLDOGS

"Similarly to Cooper Cronk, Trent is a brilliant leader and such a great marshaller of the troops whenever he's out on that field. He kicks teams to death at times and he's a top half-back to have in a side."

8 Roy Asotasi

CANTERBURY BULLDOGS

"Like Willie, big Roy is another bloke I'm hoping not to bump into too many times on a Super League field this season! What a phenomenon he is; he's a top player and a dominant forward who takes a lot of stopping."

9 Cameron Smith

MELBOURNE STORM

"This is probably the easiest pick in truth. What can you say about Cameron that hasn't already been said; he's one of the greatest hookers and captains in the history of the game, and he's just the calm in the storm when things are going tough - that's such a bonus."

10 Willie Mason

CANTERBURY BULLDOGS

"Big Willie is size, speed and power all rolled into one - he's just a pure freak when he takes to that footy field. He's been such a great servant to the game for so long and he's a blessing to have protecting you as a halfback, let me tell you that much!"

11 Sonny Bill Williams

CANTERBURY BULLDOGS

"Much like Cameron Smith, there's no way I could have left big Sonny out of my dream team. He's arguably one of the finest players in world rugby, not just in Rugby League. He's got it all, and he can produce those real moments of magic that few others can. He's a freak, simple as that."

12 Ryan Hoffman

MELBOURNE STORM

"Ryan Hoffman has to be in; he's such a warrior and is a real threat all over the park. He's another bloke that Super League fans will know well from his time over here - his work-rate and his professionalism are huge assets to have for any side, and he's such a top player."

13 Ryan Hinchcliffe

MELBOURNE STORM

"The bloke that does all the dirty work, and he does all the stuff only his teammates would perhaps understand. It's the unglamorous stuff that players see and maybe the fans don't - every good side needs a bloke like that running alongside them."



4



3



2

Getting to know

...ROY ASOTASI

THE BARNSTORMING WARRINGTON PROP TELLS JOE WHITLEY ABOUT FRESH PRINCE, FANTA AND FERRERO ROCHER...

What would your last meal on Earth be?

It would have to be a seafood platter, with everything on it - squid, octopus. I love seafood. I'd wash it down with a Fanta, a full-sugar Fanta. From Australia, not England - it's better in Australia.

What song do you listen to more than any other?

That's a tough one, I'm not sure. I'm into hip-hop and R&B but it's wide-ranging. This morning I was listening to Beyoncé (circled), but I'm also a fan of Jay-Z and Drake. And a lot of old school rap like Tupac and Biggie. I also like Kendrick Lamar, he's got his own style.



Which superpower would you most like to have?

I'd go for invisibility - you could do a lot with it. You could shoplift. I'd probably steal a lollipop, that's how ruthless I am.

What is your favourite TV show?

[Without hesitation] Fresh Prince of Bel Air (right). I'm a big fan of that show, and Will Smith. I really enjoy the humour. More recently I've enjoyed the Real Husbands of Hollywood, which is a spoof reality show with Kevin Hart. It's very funny - it's like a mockumentary.



What year would you go to in a time machine?

I'd probably say the Roaring Twenties, I'd definitely be one of those cool cats riding around like The Great Gatsby.

What scares you more than anything?

Maybe heights. I don't mind flying or bungee



jumping, but being high up for an extended period, like on a building, or even sky diving, I really don't enjoy.

What is your tippie of choice?

I really enjoy a Caprioska - it's a vodka cocktail with mint and sugar. It's similar to a mojito but not as sweet.

What was your first job?

I worked as a trolley boy at a supermarket! I was fortunate enough to experience work before starting my rugby career.

What has been the greatest moment of your life so far?

You can't go past the birth of your kids. I didn't cry but I got very

emotional - it's pretty hard for me to cry. Career-wise, winning the Premiership and being part of both the Kiwis and Samoa stands out.

Who is the worst dressed player in Rugby League?

Ben Harris, who I played with at Canterbury and who later went to Bradford Bulls. He was terrible - he would wear mustard shorts with a floral top and school shoes. He wasn't a bad looking guy but he didn't know how to use it.

What is your most embarrassing moment?

I once got knocked out in a game and got up and played the ball to the opposition, without realising!

Do you have any guilty pleasures?

Yes, sweets! I love peanut M&Ms and Ferrero Rochers are my achilles heel. It's like Christmas comes every month for me.



Who is the funniest player in Rugby League?

That's a tough one! I can't go past my time at the Bulldogs, and Willie Mason stands out. He is a funny character and was funny on a few levels - he was great at gags but also very dry.





**“
I ONCE GOT
KNOCKED OUT
IN A GAME AND
GOT UP AND
PLAYED THE
BALL TO THE
OPPOSITION,
WITHOUT
REALISING!”**



6 of the best

**Memorable
debut**

Sam Tomkins

Wigan Warriors v Whitehaven

May 12, 2008

It's hard now to imagine a time when Sam Tomkins wasn't a household name in Rugby League. But prior to Wigan's fifth round Challenge Cup tie against Whitehaven in 2008 that was very much the case. Regular watchers of Wigan's academy knew that this young lad had the potential to go far, but five tries on his first team debut showed that fact to the rest of the Rugby League fraternity. The first three of those tries came in the opening 10 minutes, meaning 19 year old Tomkins claimed the fastest ever debut hat-trick in Wigan's history.



Terry Holmes

Swinton v Bradford

Northern

December 8, 1985

Splashing out £80,000 to secure Cardiff RU star Terry Holmes on a three-year deal saw Bradford Northern make what at the time was one of the biggest signings in the game's history. He moved to Odsal after an injury prone few years and things did not improve for him after switching codes. Suffering a dislocated shoulder during the first half of his debut in an 8-0 defeat at Swinton meant he did not feature again for Northern that season. Holmes saw out his contract at Odsal but more time on the sidelines saw him play just 39 games for the club in that time.



Gareth Thomas

Crusaders v Catalans Dragons

March 19, 2010

With 100 Welsh caps to his name, and having hit the headlines as the first openly-gay rugby union player, surely nothing much could faze Gareth Thomas as made the switch to League in 2010. But no one had accounted for David Ferriol's knee and in just the second tackle of the game Thomas collided with the offending joint and never recovered. Having played on with double vision, he finally succumbed to his concussion and left the field on the half-hour mark looking more like Bambi on ice than one of the country's toughest rugby stars.



**STORY OF A
SQUAD
NUMBER**

No.10

**Huddersfield
Giants**



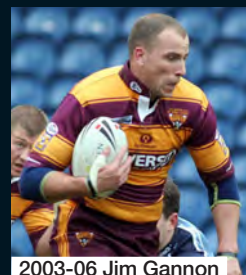
1998 Jon Neill



1999 Basil Richards



2000-01 Dale Laughton



2003-06 Jim Gannon



John Holmes

Hunslet v Leeds

August 12, 1968

Leeds legend John Holmes certainly started his career as he meant to go on when the then 16 year old made his debut against Hunslet in a Lazenby Cup match. Standing in at fullback for Great Britain captain Bev Risman, who was taking a well-earned rest after that year's World Cup, Holmes looked perfectly at home in the side kicking 10 goal from 13 attempts and bagging a try in the 47-15 victory. Although his chances were limited by Risman for the next 18 months, that confident performance was the first of 625 games he played for his hometown club.

Justin Poore

Leeds Rhinos v Wakefield Trinity Wildcats

December 26, 2012

The 2012 Boxing Day "friendly" was anything but with Wakefield's big new signing making an explosive start to life in West Yorkshire. Poore, a former State of Origin prop, went toe-to-toe with Ryan Bailey within the first 10 minutes and also conceded three consecutive early penalties. Things didn't calm down and on 20 minutes an off-the-ball collision between Bailey and Poore resulted in a brawl. As Poore threw the first punch he was inevitably dismissed - marking a brisk end to his Wakefield bow. Bailey, Mitch Achurch, also on his debut and Ben Cockayne were all sent to the bin for their part in the ruckus.



Willie Tonga **St Helens v Catalans Dragons** February 6, 2014

Fans turned up at Langtree Park on the opening day of this season expecting to see Catalans' two big new names make an early mark on Super League. With Todd Carney out nursing a calf injury, all eyes were on former Aussie test centre Willie Tonga - but not for long. After just 12 seconds and in the first tackle of the match Tonga got his head in the wrong place as Alex Walmsley drove the ball forward and was left lying on the ground. Following eight minutes of on-field treatment he left proceedings on a stretcher but fortunately made a quick recovery.



2007-08

John Skandalis



2009 & 2011

Darrell Griffin



2010 & 2012

Keith Mason



2013-14 Craig Kopczak



2015 Craig Huby

Rugby League World is published monthly in the UK by League Publications Ltd, Wellington House, Briggate, Brighouse, West Yorks, HD6 1DN.
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Magazine Photographers RLPhotos.com
Photography Action Photographics (Sydney), Allan McKenzie, Paul English, SWPix.com.

ADVERTISING

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 Email: honor.james@totalrl.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS

UK customers, 12 issues for £41.
 Overseas rates for 12 issues by Airmail: Europe £60.00, Rest of the World £78. For 6 issues by Airmail: Europe £34, Rest of the World £42.
 Subscribe online at www.totalrl.com or call 01484 401895 Mon-Fri 9am-5pm or send a cheque (drawn on a British bank), postal order or international money order (in Sterling) with your name and delivery details to the editorial address.

DISTRIBUTION

Warners Group Publications PLC
 01778 391151
 Newsagents in the UK and Eire can obtain Rugby League World via their wholesaler.

Open Rugby founded in May 1976 by Harry Edgar. Title changed to Rugby League World - March 1999.

ISSN 1466-0105. Views expressed by contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher. © League Publications Ltd 2015



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SOMETHING TO CROWE ABOUT

IT'S BEEN A MONTH OF NEW ERAS,

of new beginnings for Rugby League in this country. And while it's far too early to be making any kind of definitive assessments, it's hard to deny that there's a feel-good factor in the air.

The staggered start to the new campaign has helped it gain real momentum.

Super League kicked us off with better-than-average crowds and welcome shock results. National media coverage was much improved on recent years, and the new structure provided an element of intrigue for supporters of other sports.

The following weekend the Championship got underway and almost 7,500 saw a minor classic at Leigh versus Bradford, while other clubs reported encouraging surges in interest.

The weekend after that saw the new-look World Club Series. Not ideal yet - due to the lack of a proper qualification process - but more packed terraces, high octane action and the presence of a certain Russell Crowe ensured there was much to be positive about.

Move forward another seven days, to just after the release of this magazine, and the League One clubs get underway with their own new knock-out cup competition. It's no exaggeration to say that the third tier of the professional game has never been as strong as it will be in 2015 - expect several four figure crowds and a promotion scramble that could extend to as many as eight clubs.

So in short, a hugely promising start. There will be plenty more acid tests ahead, but the game's administrators must already see the impact that big events, matches that matter, and the hope of progression can bring to clubs and supporters.

They must also have seen the immeasurable value of having people like Crowe connected with the sport can have on its wider appeal.



The World Club Series showed the value of big events and personalities



“WHEN PEOPLE LIKE CROWE FORGE A CONNECTION WITH RUGBY LEAGUE, IT IS CRUCIAL TO MAKE THE MOST OF IT.”

We're not fortunate enough to have a Hollywood A-listers owning a Super League club as yet, unless Tom Cruise has made a surprise bid for Wakefield between the time of writing of this article and going to print.

But when people like Crowe forge a connection with Rugby League, it is crucial to make the most of it. One half-hour Q&A session in London wrote enough headlines and provided more internet clicks than the RFL could possibly have hoped for.

There's no Russell Crowe in Super League, but over here Premier League footballers are kings in the eyes of the newspapers, and their appreciation of our sport is something that needs to be capitalised upon more.

Getting Rio Ferdinand or Joey

Barton - who regularly tweet about Rugby League - to do a similarly short promotion of a targetted Super League game would provide invaluable coverage.

And those who complain about Marwan Koukash's often brash style at Salford should temper it with the fact that media outlets thrive on the drama and interest he provides - it should be welcomed rather than being frowned at for being different to what we're used to.

Crowe's own comments on spreading the game further, on pages four and five, show that there is a belief within people who have real influence that this sport we all love can extend beyond its current boundaries.

Hopefully the last month can act as a pre-cursor to further progress in the future. ●

MIND THE GAP

GARETH WALKER insists the World Club Series should remain and evolve, despite South Sydney's dominant display

SITTING IN THE POST-MATCH World Club Challenge press conference, it was difficult not to have a sense of déjà vu. That familiar feeling of British deflation, followed by an immediate inquest into how the gap between southern and northern hemispheres can be closed.

But it could all have been so different. Had Joel Monaghan hung onto his late pass and helped Warrington beat St George Illawarra, and Matty Smith's extra-time drop goal attempt found its mark, Super League could have won the inaugural World Club Series. Then the Sunday main event would have been put more down to what it actually was - a sparkling South Sydney performance on the night. There's every chance they will do that to a few NRL teams this season, no matter what people perceive about there being no blow-out games over there.

Trying to maintain a "bigger picture" stance at times like this isn't easy, but it is necessary. There were so many positives to the World Club Series that noises about its long-term future - from most of those involved - have to be welcomed.

Let's not forget that over 50,000 people attended the three matches, so the desire to see the best NRL teams in this country is undoubtedly there. And the Souths coach Michael Maguire made interesting and relevant post-match quotes about how the World Club Challenge had significantly boosted his club's global appeal, in terms of sponsorship and visibility. Almost whatever the score on the pitch, these matches have genuine value for the southern hemisphere clubs too.

The World Club Series does need a proper, transparent qualification process to have a long-term future but that is something the authorities are fully aware of. Get that in place as quickly as possible and it will give the competition added credibility.

CHERRY PICKERS?

There is, undoubtedly, the issue of vastly differing salary caps to address however. At the moment that gap between what NRL clubs can spend





**“THE TOP END TEAMS
IN SUPER LEAGUE
COULD DEFINITELY MIX
IT IN OUR COMPETITION.”
MICHAEL MAGUIRE**



compared to their Super League counterparts is only getting wider, and it was referred to by both coaches after the match.

“The salary caps make it difficult, but I’m not going to sit here and whinge about it,” St Helens’ Keiron Cunningham said.

“We know we’re a lot better than what we tossed up. We were behind the eight-ball all night and I’m not blaming the salary cap for the performance. What it could do is lead to the NRL cherry-picking our best players though.”

His counterpart Michael Maguire played down its relevance. Asked if the salary cap chasm could affect the long-

term future of the Series, he responded: “Not at all. I spent three years over here and was lucky enough to work with some great players during my time at Wigan.

“I feel there’s a lot of players that could sit inside teams playing in the NRL. The results over the weekend have been close - we put a great performance in tonight but the other two were very close. It shows there’s some top teams over here.

“For the NRL competition, across the whole game consistently there are high levels. You see a few blow-out scores here and that changes the intensity of games and the

requirement to turn up every week. But the top end teams could definitely mix it in our competition.

“For us, being part of it, and obviously winning the World Club Challenge has made it even better. How they move forward, with teams having to qualify for it, we’ll see. But for us globally this has opened up so many doors sponsorship wise.”

Another to tackle the salary cap issue was Leeds forward and players union champion Jamie Peacock, speaking on the BBC’s Super League Show special **»**

MEMORABLE MOMENT

Not one for Saints fans to cherish, but the slickness of Greg Inglis’ first half try epitomised the difference between the teams on the night.



MAN OF THE MATCH

In difficult conditions, Souths halfback Adam Reynolds played as though he had the ball on a string. Set the tone by creating the opening try and tormented Saints all night.

later that night. He reiterated calls for the introduction of a marquee player allowance in this country to allow clubs to spend more, while stressing that he saw a definite future in the World Club Series.

Peacock said: "In any walk of life talent goes where the money is.

"The event across all the weekend has been great and there's still a reason for this competition to go ahead. People in this competition (Super League) want to see the likes of Greg Inglis and the Burgess brothers playing over here. Let's keep this competition going.

"It (the St Helens game) was deflating. The two games previously had gone to the 80th minute and beyond but this game was effectively over at half-time. That's down to the quality of the Souths team - they were exceptional in every facet of the game."

IMPERIOUS INGLIS

That fact should certainly not be overlooked. From first minute to last the Rabbitohs were ruthless and clinical, watched by co-owner Russell Crowe from the main stand; a presence that provided the match and Series with a much-welcomed publicity boost.

The game was effectively over as a contest after 24 minutes, by

which time Saints had already conceded more points than they did in their first two Super League games combined.

The visitors were ahead within two minutes, Glenn Stewart reacting the quickest when a kick through from the outstanding Adam Reynolds bounced awkwardly in the in-goal.

Reynolds then skipped around Jordan Turner and sent the supporting Dylan Walker side-stepping to the line.

The imperious Greg Inglis was the next on the scoresheet, exchanging passes with centre Bryson Goodwin to slice through.

And by the half-hour mark the Rabbitohs were 24-0 ahead, John Sutton's reverse kick again taking a wicked bounce and this time Joel Reddy capitalising to score.

St Helens' best two moments had seen centre Mark Percival twice denied tries in the right-hand corner by superb Souths defence.

But they were further behind seven minutes after the restart, after another Reynolds kick resulted in a Luke Keary try. Even the temporary departure



of Reynolds through injury couldn't stem the tide, as Chris McQueen took an Inglis pass to slide over for the sixth try and then Joel Reddy scored his second.

Reynolds returned for the closing stages, and created a new widest winning margin in the competition by slotting a late drop goal.

For a man in charge of only his third senior game as a coach, that was some challenge for Cunningham to take on. But despite his obvious disappointment at the result, he joined the chorus of people calling for the World Club Series to continue.

"It's a great concept," Cunningham said. "If we could go back to Australia next year with our top three teams and play over there, it'd be a good experience all round. We tried in 1997 and I played in that competition and they were light years apart. It's a lot closer now probably than what our game gives credit for." ●

ON THE NRL RADAR?

Souths in particular have a fondness for Dewsbury lads, and they cannot fail to have been impressed with the way Alex Walmsley stood up to their towering pack up front.



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THE REAL DEAL

GARETH WALKER watched Wigan and Brisbane fight out another classic clash between two iconic clubs

WAYNE BENNETT'S PRE-MATCH

comments were hardly a ringing endorsement for the extra two World Club Series matches. The result wasn't important to him, he stated, it was more about producing a good performance ahead of the NRL season opener against Souths.

By full-time, you got the impression that the result mattered plenty to the Broncos players on the field, where the action that unfolded - plus the 20,842 attendance - helped quieten any lingering doubts over the credibility of the game.

Bennett too was more enthusiastic post-match. It was difficult not to be - the commitment, quality and drama on display had the noisy crowd enthralled throughout, and produced several moments that will last long in the memory.

"The crowd was sold out, that's the best endorsement for what we've done," Bennett said when asked about the event. "It was a great atmosphere, they will remember the game for the rest of their lives.

"It was a great crowd at Warrington as well. It's a bit like the Nines - if 50,000 people want to turn up to watch Rugby League over a weekend in Auckland we can't afford to miss the opportunity.

"This was no exhibition game. It was genuine, it was real, and it had a bit of

everything. I enjoyed it, I thought it was great for the game."

Those memorable moments were plentiful, but included two in particular.

Wigan's Sydney Roosters-bound winger Joe Burgess had endured a night to forget for the most part, including losing the ball for Andrew McCullough's opening try. But when he broke free down the left touchline from deep inside his own half with little more than a minute on the clock, he had the entire DW Stadium on its feet.

Burgess hared downfield, handed onto the supporting George Williams, and then took the return pass to score a stunning try. The Warriors still needed a nerveless Matty Smith conversion to send the game into golden point extra-time - something Bennett said he wasn't aware of - but kick it he did.

It was in extra-time that the second unforgettable incident unfolded. It wasn't the decision to award the Broncos a last tackle penalty in front of the posts for a ball steal, something the Wigan coach Shaun Wane did not contest after the game. It wasn't even Corey Parker's straight-forward kick to confirm the Broncos' win.

It came in between, when home centre Anthony Gelling performed a rugby union-style charge down



MAN OF THE MATCH

Anthony Milford lit up an often attritional game with moments of magic from stand-off. The Samoan international is going to be a major player for the Broncos in 2015.

of Parker's first penalty attempt, earning himself a yellow card and the applause and amusement of the Wigan supporters behind the posts.

Bennett said he had never seen anything like it, Wane jokingly labelled Gelling a "weirdo", and teammate Dan Sarginson said it was typical of the Kiwi three-quarter.

It produced a bizarre end to what was for the most part a gripping contest, even if Wane was justifiably disappointed with his side's execution at times.

Still, they stood toe-to-toe with one



ON THE NRL RADAR?

John Bateman was immense for Wigan. Standing in for skipper Sean O'Loughlin at loose forward, he tackled everything that moved and took the ball forward with relish.

**Brisbane's Corey
Parker makes a break**

MEMORABLE MOMENT

It could only be Anthony Gelling's charge down of Corey Parker's first penalty attempt. Wayne Bennett said he'd never seen anything like it, Shaun Wane laughed and labelled him a "weirdo".

of the NRL's most favoured sides for 2015, with back rower John Bateman epitomising their effort in both attack and defence. He was aided by a typically combative effort from hooker Michael McIlorum and some big hits from substitute Tony Clubb, but ultimately it wasn't enough against a Brisbane side that controlled long periods of an attritional second half.

Conditions were far from ideal - the DW pitch is suffering at present, not

least because Wigan Athletic played the night before, and it was biting cold throughout. Parker later claimed his toes were numb when lining up the match-winning penalty.

But as Bennett observed, this was a proper contest, and one that justified the decision to add two extra games to the World Club Challenge, even if a proper qualification method is necessary for the concept to move forward further.

For Wigan and Wane, it was a second

defeat to an NRL side in the space of a year, following the loss at Sydney Roosters in 2014. But there was still much for the coach to be positive and proud about.

"I firmly believe that game will turn our season around, because we got that much confidence out of defending," Wane said.

"We really put pressure on them and they're a very good team. I'm frustrated if I'm honest - we weren't smart with the ball but we showed some character to defend." ●

MAGIC DRAGONS

AARON BOWER heard only positive vibes from the opening World Club Series match at Warrington

DESPITE SUGGESTIONS THAT

the opening two games of the World Club Series were nothing more than glorified friendlies, Warrington boss Tony Smith was unequivocal in his view that the opening game against St George Illawarra was anything but.

The Wolves went down 18-12 to Paul McGregor's Dragons in a fiery and tempestuous start to the series that felt nothing like a friendly encounter.

And the two coaches insisted that the newly-revamped series has the potential to grow even further, with both clubs keen to be a part of it in the future.

"Both teams took it extremely seriously; whilst it wasn't the prettiest game in stages it was hard fought," Smith said.

"We showed how serious we all feel about it as a concept. We should go away from here saying this has got legs, and it's going to grow. When you get crowds and atmospheres like that it can only go one way.

"We want to be participating on the Sunday in the future, and it was good experience for us about competing against an Australian team."

Dragons coach McGregor agreed with Smith's mantra about the series expanding and evolving.

"The environment we played in tonight, there won't be many much

tougher than that back home," McGregor said.

"The atmosphere was brilliant, and I enjoyed being part of it. I think it should keep growing and growing. For us to experience this prior to Round One is fantastic, and the game was as good as any you'll see in that first half.

"To get crowds like this watching and taking part is brilliant, and we need to stick with it. Why not even throw another two teams in and bump it up to four from each country?"

On the field, the Wolves were left to reflect on a number of key errors that ultimately proved telling against their NRL counterparts.

Warrington captain Joel Monaghan had a golden opportunity to potentially level up the scores with six minutes left, but he uncharacteristically dropped the ball with the try-line begging - something he was left to reflect on after the game.

"I score a hundred of those tries and I should have been able to take that, I'm really disappointed in myself for that," Monaghan lamented.

"There were parts of our game where we got over them, and we just weren't smart enough to get on top. We went set-for-set with them but we just didn't build pressure. If we want to do well this year we're going to have to take

MAN OF THE MATCH

Benji Marshall (St George). He was everywhere for the Dragons, and his kicking game ultimately proved to be the difference.

plenty from that and learn from it."

However, the big talking point after the game was based around a flashpoint in the first half concerning St George Illawarra winger Eto Nabuli's tackle on Wolves fullback Kevin Penny.

McGregor played down the incident after the match, but Smith admitted it was frustrating to see a clear difference in the way the game was officiated from regular Super League matches.

"There was no indication the game would be refereed in a different style, and that's all we would have liked in truth," Smith said.





WARRINGTON WOLVES 12
ST GEORGE ILLAWARRA 18



ON THE NRL RADAR?

Kevin Penny has impressed during the early stages of Super League XX, and his involved performance at fullback could have caught the eye of a few observers.

“

WE SHOULD GO AWAY FROM HERE SAYING THIS HAS GOT LEGS, AND IT'S GOING TO GROW. WHEN YOU GET CROWDS AND ATMOSPHERES LIKE THAT.” TONY SMITH



MEMORABLE MOMENT

Gareth O'Brien's superb solo score was a joy to behold, but Benji Marshall's incredible banana kick that set up the winning try was equally as jaw-dropping.

“If we'd known it was going to be a bit more relaxed in areas it would have been nice to have been informed, but we'll be playing different rules again next week, don't worry. It's unfortunate, isn't it? We should just be all be playing to the same rules because it makes it easier on everyone involved.

“We played a lot of different rules tonight, I think there would have been a lot more penalties; our men in the middle didn't want to blow for a penalty and they were ultimately forced into it in the

latter stages. I think they wanted to have a clean sheet.”

On the tackle, Smith said: “It would have been a red in Super League. For the two or three boys who have been sent off in this country this year, I'd class that as a coat-hanger.

“I thought it was a shocker. There was a vibe about the whole game, we just wanted them to tell us that it was the way it was going to be, then we could have had messy rucks too throughout the game.”

Former Golden Boot winner Benji

Marshall's smart pass helped Tyson Frizzell open the scoring, before Gareth O'Brien responded with the try of the night, throwing two superb dummies to slice through from 40 metres.

A Gareth Widdop kick created the Dragons' second try for Joel Thompson, although the Wolves were back to within two when Ryan Atkins forced his way over.

O'Brien levelled the scores after the break with a penalty, before the excellent Marshall then stepped forward again to create the match winner for Josh Dugan. ●

**“ WE LAUNCHED FRIDAY NIGHT
COVERAGE WHICH MANY PREDICTED
WOULD KILL THE GAME. WHERE WOULD
WE BE WITHOUT FRIDAYS NOW?”**





sky SPORTS

SILVER LINING

Sky Sports passes a landmark in March as their longest running contract reaches its 25th year. GARETH WALKER asks director Neville Smith for the inside story on a remarkable journey

TWENTY FIVE YEARS AGO THIS month, at a cold Naughton Park, Widnes, Rugby League embarked on a new era that would shape the future of the sport in this country.

A little-known satellite TV company, employing a rookie director and enthusiastic crew, began televising live matches every weekend.

A quarter of a century on, and Sky Sports, as it is now, is in many ways the crutch on which the sport leans in the northern hemisphere. Having been key players in the switch to summer and remaining Rugby League's biggest sponsor, their partnership with the RFL is integral to the sport's past, present and future.

Their director, Neville Smith (inset), has been there from day one, and as such is one of the most influential figures in the modern game. In his own words, he can still remember "filling his pants" when preparing to take charge of his first game, having worked primarily as a freelance camera man up until then. But his list of achievements in the ensuing 25 years includes introducing video referees and being included on the Rugby League Roll of Honour, as well as providing the product we see on our screens every weekend. From those humble

beginnings at Widnes to the Super League opener in Paris, the role of Eddie Hemmings and Mike 'Stevo' Stephenson and a host of innovations, Smith's story - and that of Sky Sports' coverage of our game - is fascinating.

His own Rugby League journey began on the playing fields of Manly. Smith's dad took him to see the club's first Grand Final win against Easts in 1972, and he was hooked immediately. But despite his love for the game, a playing career never looked a feasible option.

"I worked out that despite scoring at least a thousand tries for Manly and Australia in my garden, I was in fact a pretty rubbish player," he remembers. "This was reinforced when our team didn't have enough players to have centres and I was still told to stand on the wing.

"When I was 12 I saw an ad' in a match day programme for a referee course in the school holidays conducted at the NSW RL headquarters. Mum and Dad let me get the ferry into the city to take the course and exam, which I think took about five days. I was mesmerised by the NSW club and the memories that adorned the walls there; I remember thinking it must be fantastic to be able to work in the sport itself.

"So when I was 14 I joined the Manly junior refs team and spent the rest of my youth running around at weekends with a whistle or a flag. Maybe second best to being a star halfback, it was great



to still be on the field, and never be in doubt as to how much referees love the game. If they didn't I think they would be on a beach or in a pub instead of putting up with the rubbish coming from the sidelines.

"My two claims to fame from refereeing are my lifelong friendship with former Grand Final referee Greg McCallum, who began his trade at the juniors in Manly with me, and also watching Geoff Toovey, the former Manly and Australian international who was outstanding from the age of six."

INDEPENDENT HELP

Smith's friendship with McCallum would have major effect on the sport years later, but before then he had to forge a career in television. He started as a cameraman in Australia, before packing a rucksack to go travelling, and while in London secured a job with a company that covered events including Prince's Trust concerts and Wimbledon. He also had a spell covering the 1988 Seoul Olympics for Transworld Sport, before he decided to pursue a career in Rugby League. Keen to establish himself as an independent producer, he made a documentary about the sport, with the help of one of Rugby League World's very own.

"I borrowed a camera kit and recruited the great writer Dave Hadfield who did a column in the Aussie press," Smith explains. "We went and interviewed a bundle of players from Australia who were playing in the UK in the late 80s. Dave was invaluable with his contacts and we got access to ET, Cliffy Lyons, Paul Vautin and a host more. I will always be grateful to Dave for his help amongst many others in getting that part of my career underway."

"That was at the birth of satellite TV. My efforts at making a programme got me through the door at the RFL and David Oxley, the CEO at the time told me to get in touch with BSB, who they had just done a deal with. I met with John Davis the executive producer and convinced him that with my background in the game and as a cameraman I was the man to direct their coverage. For some reason he believed me."

"Within 12 months BSB and Sky merged to become BSkyB."

While Smith was chosen as the man to lead BSB's off-screen team, they also needed a commentary duo. It wasn't

long before Eddie Hemmings and Mike Stephenson were becoming the face of BSB's new Rugby League coverage.

"Eddie and I had met when, on the RFL's recommendation, he did the voice over for my video. I met him on the steps of Granada where a friend had sneaked me into a sound suite overlooking the Coronation Street set. Eddie says I looked like an urchin on the streets but I prefer the image of a young, slick producer. Eddie is probably closer to the truth."

"Independently we both turned up at BSB not knowing the other was involved, and a partnership was born that is unique and special. Eddie had been recruited by the head of sport, who had been one of his producers at the BBC."

"Stevo pretty much chose himself. He was in town for Wembley in 1990, where Eddie introduced us, having worked with him on Radio 5 for the 1988 GB tour. He was coming back for the Kangaroos tour that year with a group of fans, so John Davis recruited him as we had just acquired the rights to the club matches for that tour."

"The rest of course is history. He was unique, larger than life, outspoken, a great pedigree and available. All the ingredients needed for a summariser. We got him back for the rest of that season and the iconic sound of Sky Sports Rugby League coverage was born and formed."

SUMMER DAYS

BSB's first rehearsal game was Widnes against Bradford in March 1990. By the start of the following season, Smith was in place as the broadcaster's director.

"My first match as director was at Bradford in September 1990. I vividly remember sitting there filling my pants as we went on air with the realisation that I now had to actually talk my way through a live coverage. Somehow I stumbled through with the great support of the crew that I've enjoyed ever since."

So how did the coverage then compare with what we see on screen now?

"The basics are very similar. The camera plan has gone from 10 to 12 match cameras but the philosophy is still the same, which is to never let the action die on the screen."

"Obviously all around we have added and enhanced the graphics, the



PARIS HAD EVERY CAPACITY TO BE A CAR CRASH AND THANK GOD IT WENT SPECTACULARLY WELL."

presentation, features and magazine content, but the basic core coverage is still very similar. We have the game surrounded by cameras, so would be pretty poor at our jobs if we missed much."

When BSB was taken over by Sky and a new company formed, the Rugby League contract was absorbed and soon resulted in exclusive rights to the Stones Bitter Championship.

"We launched Friday night coverage which many predicted would kill the game," Smith smiles. "Where would we be without Fridays now?"

"The Sky merger probably did more for the game than can ever be imagined. Ultimately it led to Super League and the massive investment in the sport which has come from Sky Sports."

The defining moment of that partnership unfolded in 1995 and resulted in the switch to summer and Super League.

"The first time I heard the idea was when we did a segment on 'Boots 'N All' in the early days called Boss for a Day,"



Eddie and Stevo have been with Sky since the early days, as below



Smith says. "Gary Hetherington was still the man driving Sheffield Eagles and it was he who voiced the idea. I thought it was brilliant and if it ever came off I'd be able to go home for Christmas.

"It was a few more years before the idea gathered pace and of course it was powers way above me in News (International) that brought it about, investing tens of millions into the game to switch to summer, in order to get in tandem with the Australian season.

"It was thrilling and daunting. All of a sudden there was a lot of pressure for fresh ideas and a focus on us that hadn't really been there before. That was a challenge but I think we got through it.

"My main memory of that time is confusion. My wife and I had also had a baby that year so as well as launching a whole new concept I was learning to be a dad. We took our new son back to Australia between the shortened Centenary season and the launch of Super League which was only about

10 weeks. This added a bit of pressure to what was a very hectic but exciting time."

SQUARE IN THE AIR

Smith had his own telling impact on the switch to summer - introducing video refereeing decisions that have been followed in several other sports.

"Greg McCallum was running the refs at that time, and as I've said we had been friends a long time. To this day we dispute who actually came up with the idea but essentially we discussed it at great length, planned the structure of it, and executed it after getting the approval from Maurice Lindsay at the RFL and Vic Wakeling, head of Sky Sports at the time.

"I had wanted to put a screen in the grounds to advertise our coverage and this gave us the perfect platform. Relaying the decisions from the truck via the screen was a revolution and every detail and back up had to be allowed for,

including that if the screen failed the ref would have the decision given to him by the nearest cameraman.

"It happened once and that cameraman is still a legend on our crew for his response. Bob Connolly asked him the decision; he pulled off his headset and shouted down the ref's mic at the top of his voice, 'Eh?', while I was trying to tell him to tell the ref to allow the try.

"The most interesting part of it was the screen engineers, who told me the eerie feeling of thousands of pairs of eyes looking at them waiting for a decision to be made."

The first time the system was used came on a red letter day for the sport as a whole - the opening night of Super League when Paris St Germain hosted Sheffield Eagles in front of a bumper crowd.

"It had every capacity to be a car crash and thank God it went spectacularly well," Smith recalls.

"The funny moment was ten minutes in when Freddie Banquet dropped the ball from about two feet in the air and Stuart Cummings decided nevertheless that he should be the first to refer a decision to the video referee. As he made the signal I took a deep breath and said 'here we go guys, hope this works'.

"Unknown to me the videotape operators were looking at each other and wondering what I was on about. In all the planning with the RFL, the refs, the screen, the feed to the screen and our facility company Telegenic, the one group I forgot to brief were the operators who were putting the replays to air.

"Luckily they were used to me and just went along with what I said. The replay showed clearly that Freddie had dropped the ball, as his blind namesake could have told Stuart, the graphic went into the screen and we all breathed out and moved on."

The following year the ill-fated World Club Challenge unfolded, with one-sided scorelines characterising an overblown competition that was criticised almost from the start.

"It's a shame it involved all the clubs from both Super Leagues because of politics, as it was always going to be a lopsided event. The original idea was a top four from each, and I am convinced that would have been a success.

"It's taken nearly 20 years for us to

»

get back towards that concept and I desperately hope that this year's World Club Series is the start of a whole new era in elite club Rugby League."

GRAND OCCASIONS

Another year on, another innovation, but one that has been infinitely more successful. The 1998 season saw the arrival of the Grand Final, with Wigan beating Leeds in the first of what has become an iconic event for the sport in this country at Old Trafford.

Smith can remember the opening night vividly. "When the teams came out and the stands erupted I nearly burst into tears. It was a viciously wet night and still over 40,000 turned out for what was almost an experiment.

"It was the best decision ever made by the game. We were consulted and supported it but Sky Sports doesn't interfere in the structure of any sport, whatever people think.

"The only influence we brought to bear was that I was convinced Saturday night was the right slot. This took it away from Premier League football and reduced the chances of schedule movement allowing it to establish itself over a few years.

"Bear in mind the Grand Final is something I grew up with, but for me it brings out a true champion each

time. Consistency is vital to secure a place in the playoffs but then you have to withstand cup football all the way through to be the winners.

"A great team and a great coach will time their run and peak at the crucial moment. For me the Canberra team of 1989 and the great Leeds team that came from fifth are classic examples of how a true champion, like a great racehorse, can come from the middle of the pack with a well-executed plan to take the honours.

"I love it and it provides the season with a focal point that everyone is aware of. The Champions League and Super Bowl do the same thing. I know some still cherish first past the post but for me the Grand Final is the ultimate test in our game.

"This year's build-up by the RFL which had the ground rocking was the best ever. Fifteen minutes of pulsating entertainment and then the kick off was amazing.

"I love the Grand Final even though it's probably my most stressful working day of the year. One day I hope to go to one instead of being in the truck. Not yet though."

Grand Final nights rank high on Smith's considerable list of highlights during his time at Sky.

"There are plenty. Probably the most



satisfying is conceiving and making the video ref system work. I think in part it has deviated a bit too much in its application but that is being addressed. I am also pleased that I coined the term 'video ref', and I get annoyed when I hear it referred to as the TMO. We should have patented the name.

"The Grand Final, being part of the fabric of the game and some tremendous Test matches between GB and Australia are also great highlights.

"And I have to say thanks to the RFL for putting me on the Roll of Honour, and the Parliamentary group for recognising my work. I really am just a fan and I still am in awe that I get invited to Wembley. It's a long journey from the Hill at Brookvale Oval, although I am just as happy sitting there watching Manly play.

"I really do have the best job in the world. I get paid to go to the footy with my mates. It can't get any better than that."

THE EDDIE AND STEVO DEBATE

Any interview with Smith cannot pass without asking for his opinion on Eddie and Stevo, the two men who launched Sky's Rugby League coverage and who remain in place 25 years on. Their presence on screen attracts more debate than most on-field matters, but their director is unequivocal in his support of both.

"Eddie and Stevo are like brothers to me. Maybe Stevo's the sort of brother that arrives late at the wedding then fills up the dance floor, but the three of us, along with Ian Proctor who is our researcher and the real brains of the outfit are a close knit operation. I'm their fiercest critic and most loyal defender.

"Eddie and Stevo have the hardest job. One day sit in front of the TV with a few notes, turn the volume down and give it a go with a friend. Record yourselves and listen back. It's tough to



“
EDDIE AND STEVO ARE LIKE BROTHERS TO ME... I'M THEIR FIERCEST CRITIC AND MOST LOYAL DEFENDER.”



Players such as Bobbie Goulding (above) and Robbie Paul (left) helped launch the summer era in style

other programmes such as Soccer AM and Game Changers cannot be replicated anywhere else.

"Plenty criticise Sky for their own reasons and fair enough, they are entitled to their own opinions. Sky is a business and must show a return on investment. That is why we work hard with the game to find the right schedules and the best matches to attract as many viewers as possible, exposing them to this great game, and guiding them where to go to discover more.

"Growing up in Sydney I can't understand the antagonism that exists towards Rugby League in parts of this country, and it's now my life's work to try and help break down those prejudices. We might not be able to please everyone, but we're definitely trying to.

"We want consolidation and continuation of the longest running contract on Sky Sports. Enhancement and further evolution of our coverage and presentation, and most importantly, reinforcing the relationship between the world's leading sports broadcaster and the 'Greatest Game'."

So what is Smith's opinion of the RFL's new structure?

"As I said, we don't offer instruction to any sport for how they should structure their game. But for what it's worth I think the new structure, so long as it is now given at least the next decade to form and establish, has the potential to fulfil the dreams of those who conceived the plan and brought it to fruition.

"We will give it our full support and hopefully watch a new era unfold where every minute really does matter."

And finally, after thousands of live broadcasts on both sides of the world, there must be more than a few amusing anecdotes to share.

"Yes there are, and no I can't. What goes on tour stays on tour. The only one I will hint at involves Stevo and a bikini.

"You'll have to imagine the rest!" ●

maintain a flow of information, opinion and entertainment. And accuracy!

"Throw in a dull game and still keep your enthusiasm and there you have Eddie and Stevo. And they have to do it again and again. Whether it's pouring at Wakefield or sparkling at Old Trafford they still provide the same raw sound because it's their job, but more importantly because they love it.

"Do they always get it right? Of course not, who does? But around them we've built a great support team with Phil Clarke, Brian Carney, Barrie McDermott, Terry O'Connor, Jon Wells and all our casual pundits. We are making a future whilst taking care of the past. That's important. One thing I guarantee, when the day comes that Eddie and Stevo are no longer involved, the same voices who criticise will be wistfully calling for their return. I've seen it time and time again.

"You should see them behind the scenes. Fans flock to them and they give freely of their time. I have lost count of the number of people who have come to the trucks over the years to watch

their first game because they'd listened to Eddie and Stevo and thought if they enjoyed it so much then it must be a good game to watch.

"They are icons, and deserve to take their place in the game's rich history."

A LIFE'S WORK

So what of the future for Sky Sports and Rugby League? Last year saw the longest contract in the relationship's history being signed, running until 2021 and taking the sport into yet another bold era under the new structure. Even that deal attracted criticism in some quarters, but Smith, understandably, is quick to defend Sky's importance to the game here.

"It is immeasurable. Would any other broadcaster or corporation have ever invested the amount into the game in the UK that Sky Sports has? There really isn't any evidence to show they would.

"There has been some competition, but on top of the rights, the production investment and support from Sky Sports News, and capacity for exposure on

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

DAVE HADFIELD WAS ON HAND TO WITNESS THE SPORT'S LAUNCH OF A BOLD NEW ERA

IT'S IRONIC REALLY; LAUNCHING

not only a new season but a new era in a setting which could serve as a symbol of the decay of the old, industrial scene.

The Victoria Warehouse is that huge, redbrick building which does its best in its LS Lowry way to upstage Old Trafford football ground, just a few hundred yards away.

The massive building has been known in recent years as home to the Warehouse Project, promoters of high-profile music events. It is on the mental map of Manchester that people a lot younger than me have in their minds.

My generation tend to have heard of it in the context of a couple of deaths. It's a gritty sort of place; very definitely not to be confused with the Opera House, the Lowry or the Bridgewater Hall.

In typical Rugby League fashion, the launch takes place on a Sunday when the Metrolink is out of action, thus removing the obvious option for getting to the place. Having found the far from obvious entrance, you are in a different world from the sun-drenched (yes, really) Salford Quays just across the way.

It feels like some giant catacomb, dimly lit, and, until the crowds started to arrive, rather spooky. If the message is one of a bright, shiny future, it seems an odd place in which to put it across.

Super League seasons have been launched in a variety of prestigious locations; Old Trafford itself, of course, which is always good for focusing minds on the Grand Final, nearly eight months ahead, but also at other venues, like Event City at the Trafford Centre.

Somehow, though, this year's event needed to be different. There seems to be a general acknowledgement within the game that things were drifting. Nothing disastrous, but a growing feeling that Rugby League was not fulfilling its potential in this country.

Hence the re-structuring of the playing season, something that nobody can truly prove will work or not work until we have seen it in action.



“THINGS WERE DRIFTING. NOTHING DISASTROUS, BUT A GROWING FEELING THAT RUGBY LEAGUE WAS NOT FULFILLING ITS POTENTIAL IN THIS COUNTRY.”

ALL ABOUT IMAGE

Its objective, though, is admirable and can be summed up in the slogan 'Every Minute Matters' or is it counts? Either way, it isn't necessarily meant to be taken too literally. There could still, in some circumstances, be games that mean nothing, but they should be few and far between. You don't get your money back, though,

"Your boys aren't afraid to innovate, are they?" says a non-rugby mate of mine when we meet up after the event.

"Well no, sometimes I think we're afraid not to." The truth is, that if we want to thrive, we have to.

We know all about the courage and athleticism of our players, the spectacular tries and the ability to show sophisticated skills under the most



punishing of pressure.

Lest we had forgotten during these barren months, there was plenty of chance to see the promotional film that does such a good job of building up a sense of anticipation.

Super League's general manager, Blake Solly, knows how important the quality of the spectacle on the field is. Few of us would feel as passionately as we do about it if it was not for that; but there is another side to it.

Successful sports are all about image; look at Premier League football, the Big Bash in cricket, or the Six Nations. The



Wigan's Josh Charnley meets Coronation Street actresses Brooke Vincent and Tina O'Brien

attraction of all these 'brands' has as much to do with image as with reality.

Instead of bemoaning the state of affairs that sees Rugby League getting less than its share of the public's attention, though, we need to jump on the same wave that others have ridden.

"We need to change the perception of the game," says Solly. "We can only do that by doing things differently."

A DIFFERENT PATH

That leaves all manner of possibilities open, but, if the launch was any guide, it denotes a younger outlook and a more vibrant approach.

Compared with any other I've been to, there was the minimum of men in suits, speaking from the stage to the congregation and none of the paralytically dull interviews with coaches and players that have taken any momentum out of similar gatherings in the past. That left them free to do what they do best; interact with media and fans like the good blokes they are, but ones who happen to have extraordinary abilities. Others among us might have a degree of trepidation, but I've never known the players as a whole so impatient for the new season. That has to be a good sign. There was an atmosphere of fun and informality. Some of my colleagues had brought their kids along and made it into a family day out.

And the last word went not to Nigel Wood or to Blake Solly, but to a band I'm told carries a good deal of credibility – Reverend and the Makers. They were the star turn that gave substance to another motto: Rugby League Rocks.

By that time there were over a thousand in attendance, by no means full, but on the top side of the RFL's expectations – and it would surely have been more if they hadn't been digging up the Metrolink.

Time will tell whether the event struck the right note, but it was further evidence that Rugby League is prepared to do things differently, on and off the pitch. ●

JJB
THE INTERVIEW



REBORN IN THE USA

JAMIE JONES-BUCHANAN WAS GIVEN A UNIQUE INSIGHT INTO RUGBY LEAGUE IN AMERICA RECENTLY. HERE IS HIS FASCINATING REPORT ON WHAT HE DISCOVERED



I recently returned from Leeds Rhinos' pre-season trip to Jacksonville, Florida feeling as enthused and encouraged as ever about being a part of our great game. Not only was it a good process for the club, it also proved to be a huge encouragement to see how Rugby League is growing at an impressive rate thanks to a few real pioneers there.

We played an exhibition game against the USA Pioneers at the University of North Florida, whereas in the past we have faced South Sydney and Salford. This time though, the depth of the American competition meant that they had the personnel and resources to select a team picked from a variety of regional teams across USA, from Florida right up to New York and Delaware.

The whole day was fantastic. We played the game in a festival-

type atmosphere with support from various corners of the USA, then we had a short reception and a post-match get together with players and delegates from the heart of USA Rugby League. We won the game by 70 points plus, but that didn't matter - all I remember was a group of athletic men who despite being well behind on the scoreboard never gave up running hard or tackling with conviction. That description also sums up how they go about our game off the field too.

There's no doubt that the sport-crazed USA has more than the physical potential to produce fantastic Rugby League players - all they're missing is the regular high quality competition that will help them sharpen their skills. Both Wigan and Leeds visited Florida during December and January and gave the Pioneers that very opportunity.

Leeds in particular were joined by two promising young men in the form of Terrance "Smash" Williams, who grew up playing American football, and Joe Eikner from Orlando who was a baseball player studying at the University of North Florida.

At the post game reception we were repeatedly referred to as an elite team of world rugby but I couldn't help think that with time and support, American Rugby League has the potential to one day dwarf us in the UK.

One of the key figures behind USA Rugby League is Daryl "Spinner" Howland - a Brisbane-born Australian who moved to the States in 2000 as a marketing manager before setting up the Jacksonville Axemen, now one of the biggest Rugby League franchises in the USA. It's humbling to see the work that Spinner does, not just in »





Jacksonville but in partnership with other teams across the USA that have not yet reached the tribal "everyman for himself" mentality we have over here.

The problem as always though is money - the way American sport is run means it comes directly out of college and sporting institutes with large followings, and thus is attractive to TV and its sponsors. Unfortunately League is a relatively new sport that is not readily played in the colleges and universities but Spinner tells me things are moving steadily in the right direction.

SUPER LEAGUE HELP

"Rugby League is moving in the right direction in the USA," Spinner insisted. "Playing numbers are up, the number of teams is up, younger players are finding the sport, there are some reserve grade teams playing now, plus a few youth teams in the north east. And of course this all means that the number of fans who are exposed to the sport has increased.

"The challenges are always financial. With the size of the USA, travel costs and team accommodation are always the biggest hurdle. The key to this, and the Catch-22, is television. TV reaches 10 times those who attend games, but to get TV you need to show good viewer numbers to make it attractive to sponsors. But of course to get on TV, you first need sponsor dollars to pay for it all. What we need is for a sponsor to jump in with us to cover the production and broadcast costs, and RL in the USA will take off very fast.

"The truth is that Rugby League is a sporting product, and in a nation that already has some of the most powerful products for sale, we are all out selling Rugby League to anyone who will at least try it as an option, or as an addition to the ones they already enjoy. Time and time again, we find most will continue to buy it once they try it. The more players, teams, fans, supporters and sponsors we have, the larger the sales team."

We often complain that Super League is not where it should be and isn't growing at the rate it needs to, but when you see the uphill struggle Spinner and many others in the USA are up against you appreciate what we have. The irony is, if the game took off in the States, you only need to see how the Americans do sport to see that it has the potential to dwarf us.



“TEAMS LIKE LEEDS WHO HAVE COME TO THE USA MULTIPLE TIMES HAVE DONE AN INCREDIBLE AMOUNT TO IMPROVE THE SPORT.” - JACKSONVILLE AXEMEN FOUND DARYL “SPINNER” HOWLAND

All the Pioneers need is continuing support from some of the elite teams of the world, and having Wigan and Leeds visit Jacksonville twice in as many months to complement the visits of South Sydney and Salford in the past seems to go a long way.

"Having teams who play at the elite level is massive on three fronts," Spinner continued.

"One, it allows Rugby League in the USA to get international exposure that helps generate interest in the hard work being done by the countless volunteers in the USA.

"Two, it lets our players see that there is higher level opportunity within the sport. In a nation where the big sports are only played in the USA, showing domestic players that the rest of the world is an option within the sport really helps keep them engaged in the sport.

"Thirdly, the level of coaching and skills they

are exposed to is huge. All the players then take this back to their teams and pass it on to others. Every time domestic players are exposed to higher levels of the game, it moves the bar up across the entire USA Rugby League.

"I make it clear to all our players, teams like Leeds who have come to the USA multiple times, have done an incredible amount to improve the sport in a number of fronts, and for that we are all very thankful."

COURAGE UNDER FIRE

The USA seems to be an attractive retreat for English footballers to go and wind down their careers these days, and having been to the States twice in the last two months I can honestly say I have finally found somewhere that can compete with Bramley for great places to live. I guess Florida is one of the better holiday

regions of the USA and for the first time in my life I can say that its somewhere I could definitely spend a period living there.

The fact that Rugby League is a developing sport with many challenges of its own makes it that bit more attractive. Everyone talks about Australia and its sporting lifestyle but in my experience, America blows it out of the water.

Even more interesting is that America's favourite cousin - Canada - is also boasting a huge increase of interest in Rugby League. It's exciting what could happen across the other side of the Atlantic but I suspect that there are practical stages and processes that need to happen in the short term to keep things moving forward sustainably.

While Leeds were in America, Spinner put forward two of his most promising men - Joe Eichner and Terrance "Smash" Williams, who spent the week training with us.

If you go through the Pioneers team, it's full of men with the traditional American sporting roots, but whom for whatever reason have passionately migrated over to playing Rugby League.

Joe Eichner is from Orlando and came to the University of North Florida initially to play his childhood sport of baseball, before transitioning through union then onto League. He is now one of the stand-out men for the Jacksonville Axemen and it's easy to see why - his athletic ability is right up there, as you would expect from a young American University guy.

The day before we left Joe was with us for a weights session and was walking around with a huge bruise on the back of his left leg. At the time I thought this must be a bang but it turned out to be a hamstring tear. He had done it in training with us the day before we played the Axemen but wanted to play against us so much that he kept it to himself and turned out anyway.

Maybe not the smartest thing to do but



Daryl 'Spinner' Howland is a key figure in American Rugby League

sometimes in life when there's an opportunity in front of you, and you want it enough, you will do anything to take it. It showed a great deal of spirit and determination, which for me is the biggest ingredient in any player.

"I figured it out on Saturday that I had torn my hamstring in Saturday's training with you guys," he explained. "Then I went to go train with the Pioneers and Saturday morning we had to go through a training camp. It was hurt pretty bad but the trainer kept rubbing it down which helped a lot. But it was 15 minutes into the game that it really kicked in.

"By then my adrenaline was going and I wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to play against the Rhinos, let alone with them. That wasn't going to slow me down. It wasn't until after that it really kicked in. A lot of (American) footballers push through pain and have a

degree of mental toughness, so they can push through injuries and not just play around it, sometimes you just have to do that."

CODE WARS

This might sound daft but being amongst Americans, to me is like being in a film, because the place and the people are exactly the same as they are in the movies. Within the same stereotype I could only imagine that hardened American sportsman would have an extrovert opinion on something different like Rugby League; even when there was an error or a missed kick during our game with the Pioneers there would be some American kid shouting, 'You suck!'

I thought it was great, but I wondered »



Leeds Rhinos take on the USA Pioneers



how Joe was received as a League player at the centre of university life.

"People think of union when it comes to rugby - there are way more union teams but League is still growing and is known as the tough man's sport. People are getting to know the game and it is getting huge here in Jacksonville, we have a huge following come out to watch every game. We have created four new teams in this last season and they're talking about creating another two this year and that's just because the sport's growing. Our fans have quadrupled in the last few years.

"A lot of the union people don't like the League aspect and it kind of rags on you a little bit. At the same time the League people make fun of the union people about being girls. A lot of the guys won't go from union to League but a lot of the League boys play both.

"I personally prefer League. Guys think it's crazy if you play rugby here, much of that is because they don't know a whole lot about it. Then when they see all the boys out on the field and how big some of them are, they think they're even more crazy. But the fans love it and it is growing.

"Training with you guys I was really impressed with the speed and the crispness of the game - it's crazy how so much practice can pay off and how smooth it can be. Having support when you're running lines, putting three or four guys into a hit and how clean the passes can be, I just want to take that back to our team."

PHYSICAL ATTRACTION

Terrance "Smash Williams was a young, enthusiastic and extremely positive American footballer who was invited to try out League after Spinner spotted his strong runs during a union game. For me he is the perfect example of how the American football athleticism is the perfect base for playing our game.

"My whole family played football for as long as I can remember," he explained. "I played football in my four years of high school. I was a guard in the defensive line, my brother's playing now, he's a running back. My step dad played college football for South Carolina - a big football school,

Terrance "Smash" Williams switched from American football to League and played a half for Leeds Rhinos



HE PRETTY MUCH DESCRIBED IT TO ME AS A TEAM OF RUNNING BACKS AGAINST A TEAM OF LINE BACKERS."

USA PIONEER TERENCE WILLIAMS

he was a running back too. We traditionally watched my brother's high school games on Friday nights, college football on Saturday and the NFL on Sunday.

"Spinner Howland recruited me at a union game when I was playing for one of my college teams before I came to university. We were at KSU in Georgia, he came up to me after the game and said to me, 'I like the way you run the ball', and that he would like me to bring that kind of style to Rugby League. He pretty much described it to me as a team of running backs against a team of line backers, so any footballer would be like, 'yeah man, I am definitely doing this'. He gave me the flyer for the tryout and I was there for the first day of it."

I was fairly surprised yet in someway encouraged to find that some of the American footballers found rugby to be a perceivably dangerous sport. I think all our mums are

understandably concerned when we start out playing Rugby League - my nana still can't wait for the day that I finish."

The absence of helmet and pads makes it seem that bit tougher but as with any skill, learning the technique and doing things properly is what makes it safe. The boys stayed with us to watch a short film about the last decade for the Rhinos in which there is a clip of Sonny Bill Williams's big shoulder charge on Marcus Bai in the 2005 World Club Challenge.

At the time it was a great part of our game which has since been outlawed. I understand why but Terrance talked about how American football over the years has become more sanitised and less interesting. On our trip to the Jacksonville Jaguars NFL team I learned that there is even a cap on the length of time each team is allowed on the training field to safeguard their wellbeing. Terrance helped me

to remember that what's at the core of our game makes it so special.

"My mum wasn't happy when she found out I was going to play League, she was like, 'This is a very dangerous sport'. She didn't even like to see me playing at school, she would see everyone get hurt except me and wasn't fond of me playing, but once I started playing more she got used to it.

"I think if people knew Rugby League and got the right explanation of it, they would like it more than football. Football has so many penalties nowadays and you just can't hit like you used to anymore.

THE FUTURE

"Rugby is more physical and you can do more with the ball. I had to get used to playing without the pads. I have been used to wearing a helmet, knee pads and shoulder pads all my life so coming out with no pads was kinda iffy at first, but it was pretty much instinct not having the pads after that.

"People are iffy about the safety concerns of playing League, but they come and watch me and I never get hurt, you just have to know what you are doing. If you have played the sport before you just have to know the technique, how to tackle and how to run the ball.

"I would love to expand out overseas and learn a unique skill set. I have a friend who streams the Rugby League from overseas. He gives us a link so that we can stream the game on the website or we can watch the games on YouTube."

For those that want to follow Terrance's progress you can do so on Twitter @dream_chaser45 and on Instagram, twgsu12.

LASTING MEMORY

Florida was another great trip both for our



“WHEN THEY SEE ALL THE BOYS OUT ON THE FIELD AND HOW BIG SOME OF THEM ARE, THEY THINK THEY’RE CRAZY. BUT THE FANS LOVE IT AND IT IS GROWING.” USA PIONEER JOE EICHNER

development as a group and a great way to prepare individually for the start of our season, but the lasting memory for me will be of these real Pioneers working hard on and off the pitch to make Rugby League everything it can be in the USA.

Do you know that American football was born out of rugby union just before Rugby League was, in 1880? I had no idea but Kevin Wiggins, who plays for Philadelphia Fight, told me after the game against the Pioneers. In an interesting way the NFL is a cousin of ours.

We had a short visit to the Jaguars stadium where we learned that Shahid Khan, the Fulham FC owner, bought them not too long ago for £700 million in cash. Having come to the USA from Pakistan as a student, Shahid struggled to pay the rent on his student accommodation.

Somehow he came across a tax law in the States whereby imported cars arriving in the USA are taxed as they're imported, but if they arrive incomplete and need to be finished then the tax is waived.

So Khan started importing cars with just the front bumper missing, the car was thus incomplete, had no need to pay tax, and the bumper was added as soon as it arrived at the port. He turned over billions of pounds and made his riches.

It's a great story and great for the Jaguars, but I leave Florida wishing that Khan might have invested one per cent of what he paid for his NFL team into USA Rugby League so that Spinner and his boys could make the game everything that it needs to be. ●



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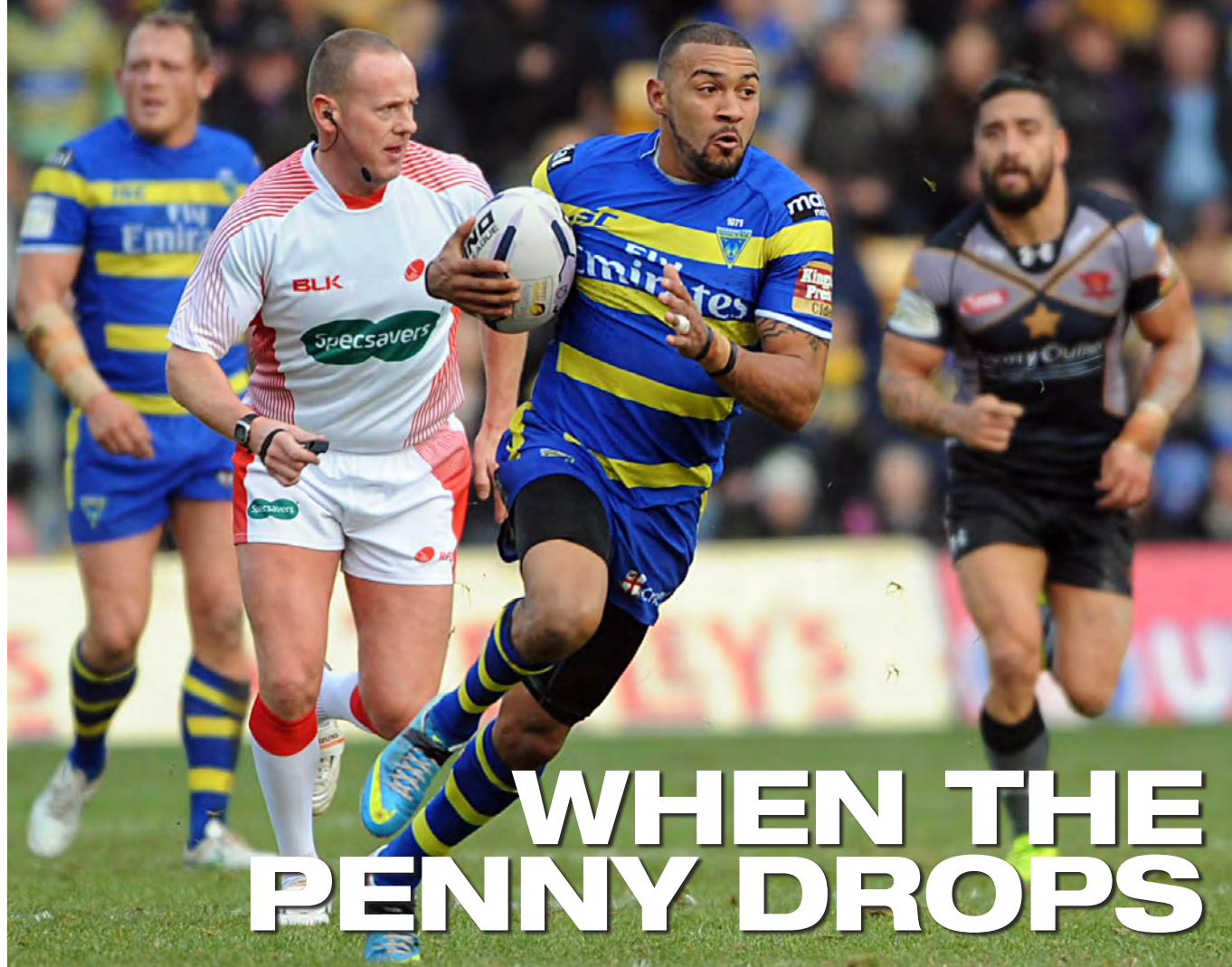


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KEVIN PENNY IS DETERMINED TO make the most of his second - or is it third - chance at a Super League career.

Penny was being touted as the next Martin Offiah when he burst onto the scene in 2007. By the end of that season he had scored 12 tries in 13 games, made the Super League Dream Team and the Great Britain training squad.

But by his own admission, Penny was a raw Rugby League talent. His sporting background was in basketball, he had hardly played the 13-man code, and despite his blistering pace, he was soon being found out by opposition defences.

Slowly, he started to drop down the league ladder, spending time on loan at Harlequins, being released by Wakefield and finding new homes at Swinton and Sale RFC.

By the time Tony Smith rang him at the end of 2013 asking if he fancied another crack at the top flight, he was delivering parcels as a courier having also worked fitting fireplaces.

Penny explains: "When Tony phoned I was actually delivering a parcel in Manchester - I was working as a courier on call. I thought he must have sat on his phone or pressed the wrong button, but he said he'd been watching me and was impressed, and asked if I fancied giving it another try.

"It's been a tough journey when I think about it, but enjoyable as well.

"I left college and went straight into rugby, and didn't experience what it was like to have a proper job.

"Having done that since makes me appreciate how hard people work for a living, and how lucky a profession being a rugby league player is.

"It was tough to take the phone call saying I wasn't going to be at Wakefield anymore, because at the time I'd just had a little boy and had a mortgage to to pay.

"I wasn't really qualified to do anything else.

"But it made me a strong person, and the person I am today.

"There were definitely times when I thought my chance had gone - at Swinton I thought things had probably run their course and that I should concentrate on getting a job and not rugby.

"But I wanted to help Swinton in the best possible way, and fortunately enough for me Gary Chambers got the head coaching job there and I was pretty close to him.

"He knew how to get the best out of me, and it was then that Tony Smith called me up and offered me another deal."

But Penny's second coming didn't

go quite as planned - injuries wiped out much of his 2014.

"It was frustrating," he admits.

"When I came back I questioned myself a bit and wondered if I was still good enough - whether I still had the tools. I was down the pecking order but got a chance against Castleford and Bradford, and then I did my medial ligament and was out for two or three months.

"By the time I came back it was semi-final time, the boys were playing well and I couldn't get back in.

"But it had been good to know I could still play at that level, and personally I felt I still belonged in that environment."

Since the start of the season Penny has been one of Warrington's stand-out performers and now intends to make the most of this chance.

He added: "I'd like to think I trained really hard in pre-season, and although I started off down the pecking order I worked myself up.

"I'm first choice at the moment but I'm not taking that for granted, it's a week-by-week thing for me now.

"You just have to work hard every day and appreciate what you've got. Not a lot of people get a second chance - I've been lucky enough to get one and I've got to make the most of it."

— GARETH WALKER





Joe Bullock



BARROW RAIDERS

POSITIVES

The appointment of respected local coach Paul Crarey. He's moulded together a competitive, locally based squad and whilst he'll play down their chances you can bet the Raiders will be a force for anyone in the division, especially on home soil. Crarey is unlikely to come under too much pressure if things don't go their way - the club is preaching a long-term rebuilding policy.

NEGATIVES

It's a young squad, and a rebuilt one following on from the relegation season of 2014. That could mean some unforeseen defeats and setbacks, but more likely to be viewed as part of a longer-term learning curve.

KEY LOSS

DALTON GRANT scored 18 tries in a relegation team last term.

PROSPECTS

Pre-season went really well for the Raiders with big home wins over Whitehaven and Keighley Cougars suggesting that Barrow fans can be optimistic. One of Crarey's aims was for his club not to be blown away by more experienced opposition. That looks unlikely.

BIG YEAR FOR

LIAM HARRISON - always one to give his all for his hometown club, his experience in amongst a very young squad will be vital.



ONE TO WATCH

JOE BULLOCK, once again on loan from Leigh, is a prop forward of real promise.

KEY GAIN

JOSH WARD, signed on loan from Leigh Centurions. The halfback looks a real star of the future and a bonus for the Raiders is that he is a capable goal kicker to boot.

RAIDERS 2015 SQUAD

- 1 KRISTIAN TYSON
- 2 LEE HANEY
- 3 CHRIS HANKINSON
- 4 MAX WIPER
- 5 KYLE DOLAN
- 6 BRAD MARWOOD
- 7 LIAM CAMPBELL
- 8 JOE BULLOCK
- 9 NATHAN MOSSOP
- 10 ANDREW DAWSON
- 11 LIAM HARRISON
- 12 CRAIG BRISCOE
- 13 DAN TOAL
- 14 JOSH WARD
- 15 RAURI MCGOFF
- 16 ADAM NICHOLSON
- 17 JAMIE BUTLER
- 18 DANNY JONES
- 19 MATTY HEATON
- 20 SHANE TOAL
- 21 ANTHONY BATE
- 22 JOE HAMBLEY
- 23 CHRIS FLEMING
- 24 ANDY LITHERLAND
- 25 PETER LUPTON



Simon Phillips



COVENTRY BEARS

POSITIVES

The Bears finally make their debuts in the professional Rugby League arena and can be buoyed by their extremely useful dual registration link-up with Championship outfit Bradford Bulls. After a lengthy journey under club founder Alan Robinson, this year will provide the opportunity to realise a lot of long-held dreams.

NEGATIVES

The 2015 season will be a much more testing campaign for the Bears than that faced by the new clubs in 2013, with them the only newcomers. How strong the Bears will be, especially against the clubs relegated from Championship remains to be seen.

KEY LOSS

Given it's their debut season in the professional game, there have been no outgoings at Coventry Bears.

PROSPECTS

It is sure to be a difficult debut campaign for the Bears who find themselves in both an expanded and experienced League One.

BIG YEAR FOR

TOM TSANG makes his debut as a coach in the professional game, and 2015 will be very much a learning curve for the Bears as they adjust to their new surroundings.

ONE TO WATCH

JAMAHL HUNTE is a young winger who came through the junior system at Newsome Panthers and has been in the Academy ranks at Wakefield and Halifax. Played in the pack at Halifax last season but a move back to the three-quarters is mooted at Coventry.

KEY GAIN

PAUL IVAN arrives from the French domestic competition but has played over 100 games in the Queensland Cup. Not only does Ivan bring experience, which will be vital to the Bears in their debut season, he can play both centre and second row.

BEARS 2015 SQUAD

DYLAN BALE
CHRIS BARRATT
ALEX BEDDOWS
CAMERON BOULTER
TROY BROPHY
ALEX BROWN
STEPHEN COLEMAN
MATT COOPER
CHRIS DIXON
JAMES GEURTJENS
RICHIE HUGHES
JAMAHL HUNTE
PAUL IVAN
RYAN JENKINS
EDDIE MEDFORTH
REECE NEEDHAM
BEN PARRY
SIMON PHILLIPS
DAN POULTON
BILLY SHEENS
NICK TAYLOR
LIAM THOMPSON
BEN TYERS
ANDY WINFIELD
BEN RUNDLE
JOHN ALDRED
JOSH BELL
ANDY MCGRORY
DAVID O'CONNOR
LIAM SCOTT
JAKE PRATLEY
CALLUM WISHART

SQUAD NUMBERS NOT AVAILABLE AT THE TIME OF WRITING

RLW PREDICTS: 14th



Derrell Olpherts



HEMEL STAGS

POSITIVES

There will be no loud banging of the drums from the Stags - stability and quietly going about their business is the name of the game under the astute leadership of Bob Brown off the field and coach Troy Perkins on it. A dual registration agreement with Hunslet will help the Stags, who like many outside the heartlands, have found signing players difficult during the close season.

NEGATIVES

Recruitment has been quiet for the Stags in 2015 so there's a question mark about the overall strength of their squad.

KEY LOSS

AARON SMALL has been a regular for the Stags in their first two seasons in the professional ranks but has returned to his former club London Skolars. He scored seven tries in 17 appearances in 2014.

PROSPECTS

Troy Perkins has worked wonders with the Stags and, despite a limited number of recruits during the close season, they can be expected to be the top ranked expansion club.

RLW PREDICTS: 9th

BIG YEAR FOR

Talented youngster JAMES WOODBURN-HALL joins from London Broncos and is a key signing at halfback for the Stags. The 20-year-old ran out three times in Super League last year, the most memorable of which involved scoring against St Helens in a 16-58 loss at the Hive.

ONE TO WATCH

JAMES WOODBURN-HALL. The former London Broncos youngster made his Super League debut in 2014 and, after being released, has opted to continue with his studies and play part-time for the Stags.

KEY GAIN

ROB THOMAS, the London Skolars prop who came through the academy ranks at Harlequins. Getting hold of an experienced front rower is a real bonus for any club outside the M62 corridor.

STAGS 2015 SQUAD

ALEX ANTHONY
CONNOR BOYD-BARNES
MICHAEL BROWN
RYAN CHESTER
VICTOR COKER
JERMAINE COLEMAN
JY-MEL COLEMAN
ASH FYSON
JAMES HELLIWELL
JAMES HOWITT
ALEX INGARFIELD
BEN KAVANAGH
CHARLIE LAWRENCE
DAN LJAZOULI
MALIKHI LLOYD-JONES
JASE LONG
DOMINIC MALONEY
CHRIS MCNAMARA
EDDIE MBARAGA
MILES MCLEOD
JIMMY MORGAN
JAMIE O'CALLAGHAN
LIAM O'CALLAGHAN
DERRELL OLPHERTS
AIDEN PRITCHARD
MIKE STEWART
BARRY-JOHN SWINDELLS
ROB THOMAS
JAMES WOODBURN-HALL

SQUAD NUMBERS NOT AVAILABLE AT THE TIME OF WRITING



KEIGHLEY COUGARS

POSITIVES

Player coach Paul March has managed to retain the majority of his 2014 squad and, as they were the highest placed of the five clubs relegated from the Championship, you can understand why the Cougars are seen as the favourites for both the league and cup competitions.

NEGATIVES

The Cougars will be the team that everyone will want to beat in League One; if only because they are the bookies' favourites to do well.

KEY LOSS

No-one played more games than big prop SEAN HESKETH for the Cougars last season. The 28-year-old, who joins Batley Bulldogs for the 2015 season, made 29 appearances for Keighley in 2014 and scored six tries. Big, fast forwards are valuable assets and are difficult to replace.

PROSPECTS

Keighley were probably favourites to do well before hooker James Feather and back rower Josh Lynam returned to the club. Bound to be there or thereabouts.

BIG YEAR FOR

JOSH LYNAM matched Hesketh in terms of appearances for the Cougars last season and looked to be heading to Australia. He's returned without settling down under and will be keen to help his hometown team to promotion.

ONE TO WATCH

It can be hard telling them apart and twins PAUL and DAVID MARCH are the sorts to keep an eye on - on and off the field. They are certain to provide some serious entertainment. Indeed, even at 35 the pair will be among the best players in the division.

KEY GAIN

DAVID MARCH links up with brother PAUL for the first time since the twins were together at York City Knights. Bound to be a very influential player at this level and one who might just earn consecutive promotions.

COUGARS 2015 SQUAD

- 1 JESSE SHERIFFE
- 2 GAVIN DUFFY
- 3 DALEY WILLIAMS
- 4 DANNY LAWTON
- 5 PAUL WHITE
- 6 DANNY JONES
- 7 PAUL HANDFORTH
- 8 SCOTT LAW
- 9 JAMES FEATHER
- 10 ROSS PELTIER
- 11 ASH LINDSAY
- 12 BRENDON RAWLINS
- 13 DAVID MARCH
- 14 LUKE HAIGH
- 15 NEIL CHERRYHOLME
- 16 JODE SHERIFFE
- 17 OLIVER PURSGLOVE
- 18 LEWIS GRAHAM
- 19 MATTHEW BAILEY
- 20 RYAN PATCHETT
- 21 SEAN KELLY
- 22 CHRIS WATSON
- 23 AARON NICHOLSON
- 24 LIAM DARVILLE
- 25 ANDY GABRIEL
- 26 PAUL MARCH
- 27 TOM COURTNEY
- 28 JOSH LYNAM

RLW PREDICTS: 2nd



Dave Williams



LONDON SKOLARS

POSITIVES

The Skolars are often one of the last clubs to release details of their squad numbers and you often sense that they may be keeping an ace or two up their sleeves. Joe Mbu remains in charge and brings a strong element of continuity.

NEGATIVES

After finishing fourth in 2013 the Skolars slumped to seventh last year - can they improve on a third bottom finish? They have a new 4G artificial pitch at their revamped New River ground but will be looking for an on the field improvement as well.

KEY LOSS

MARTYN SMITH played 21 games for the Skolars last term and to lose a player of that experience in one of the organisational roles in the team will take some replacing.

PROSPECTS

All things considered, it looks like it will be another difficult year for Joe Mbu and his team.

BIG YEAR FOR

JOE MBU is a long established coach at this level and will be the one who knows just how big a challenge the Skolars have on their hands to improve on last season. With recruitment on the light side is 2015 the right time to promote some of their youngsters?



ONE TO WATCH

One player who came through in 2014 was JUDD GREENHALGH, the scorer of seven tries in 15 outings for the Skolars. He could be joined by brother Michael in the 2015 line-up.

KEY GAIN

One of the reasons why the Skolars did so well in 2013 was the form of fullback JAMES ANTHONY. He's returned after a year in Australia where he's played a good level of Rugby League.

SKOLARS 2015 SQUAD

JAMES ANTHONY
JAMES CARTY
DION CHAPMAN
ANTHONY COX
SAM DRUCE
DAVE ELLISON
WILL FAIRHURST
KAZEEM FATOURI
JUDD GREENHALGH
MICHAEL GREENHALGH
MATT LYLE
JOHN PAXTON
LOUIS ROBINSON
AARON SMALL
MICHAEL SYKES
SAM WELLINGS
DAVE WILLIAMS
CALEB ADETONA
KAZEEM FATOURI
LOUIS SUTHERLAND
MICHAEL BENSON
MICHAEL CRABTREE
SEBASTIAN KOLASA
VINCENT SPURR
SMOKIE JUNIOR

SQUAD NUMBERS UNAVAILABLE AT THE TIME OF WRITING

RLW PREDICTS: 10th



Jason Payne

NEWCASTLE
THUNDER

NEWCASTLE THUNDER

POSITIVES

Now firmly part of the rugby family at the Kingston Park ground that they will share with Newcastle Falcons, there are positive vibes coming from the club in terms of promotion, though chairman Bill Midgley goes no further than to say that's just an "ambition". Thunder will continue their partnership with Hull KR but look to have a much stronger squad this season.

NEGATIVES

The loss of star signing Garry Lo, who returned home to Papua New Guinea in controversial fashion without playing a single game for Thunder.

KEY LOSS

Although GARRY LO never played a game for Thunder, having last season's Queensland Cup top try scorer would have undoubtedly been a real asset for the Newcastle club.

PROSPECTS

Should figure in the final League One shootout for promotion to the Championship but their chances would have been so much better had Lo not returned home. Just how costly his departure will be remains to be seen.

BIG YEAR FOR

STANLEY GENE. Now in a full-time role, Gene did well in his first season as head coach with Thunder when he shared that role with duties at Hull KR.



ONE TO WATCH

DAYNE CRAIG – gone unnoticed by many due to the high profile signings of international players from PNG. Craig could be another influential figure in Thunder's midfield.

KEY GAIN

Papua New Guinea hooker CHARLIE WABO will run Stanley Gene's game plan at Thunder, and already has experience of English conditions.

THUNDER 2015 SQUAD

MATT BARRON
MATTY BEHARRELL
JACOB BLADES
DANIEL BLEEK
CRAIG BOOT
SAM BOWRING
JOE BROWN
TOM CAPPER
RHYS CLARKE
ZACH CLARKE
DAYNE CRAIG
LEWIS DAVY
LEE FEWLESS
BENN HARDCASTLE
JOE HODGSON
STUART KAIN
SAM LUCKLEY
RYAN MACDONALD
LEE MAPALS
JORDAN MEADS
MARK MEXICO
IAIN MURRAY
JASON PAYNE
JAMES POCKLINGTON
ALEX RUFF
LOUIS SHERIFF
EVAN SIMONS
PAUL STAMP
JASON TALI
DAN TURLAND
CHARLIE WABO

SQUAD NUMBERS NOT AVAILABLE AT THE TIME OF WRITING

RLW PREDICTS: 7th



Andy Moulds



NORTH WALES CRUSADERS

POSITIVES

There are plenty of players at the Crusaders who were part of their superb 2013 Championship One and Northern Rail Bowl winning squad. They will have positive memories to take into 2015 now that they are back in the third tier. The Crusaders have also linked up with Warrington and are likely to have an already good squad bolstered by some quality youngsters.

NEGATIVES

League One in 2015 will be a vastly different proposition to the level of competition that the Crusaders faced at this level two seasons ago; it will be much harder.

KEY LOSS

The Crusaders have only lost two senior players to other clubs with forwards TOBY ADAMSON and STEVE BANNISTER off to pastures new.

PROSPECTS

The Crusaders, always cheered on by a noisy and enthusiastic following, can be expected to be in the end of season shake up.

BIG YEAR FOR

ANTHONY MURRAY, the Crusaders coach did well after replacing Clive Griffiths at the Welsh club; although the Crusaders were relegated they weren't outclassed often during the closing months of the 2014 campaign.

ONE TO WATCH

JONO SMITH. It was a delight to see this powerhouse forward enjoy his Rugby League in 2013 and if he can recapture that form this season then the Crusaders could well be a force to be reckoned with.

KEY GAIN

Twenty-five-year-old ALEX THOMPSON joins from Oxford where he was captain and second in the club's try-scoring charts last season, bagging 11 four-pointers in 19 appearances. He will be a versatile member of the Crusaders squad for coach Anthony Murray.

CRUSADERS 2015 SQUAD

- 1 TOMMY JOHNSON
- 2 SCOTT TURNER
- 3 CHRISTIAAN ROETS
- 4 MATT REID
- 5 ROB MASSAM
- 6 ANDY MOULSDALE
- 7 JAMIE DALLIMORE
- 8 JONNY WALKER
- 9 CALLUM WRIGHT
- 10 RYAN DUFFY
- 11 JONO SMITH
- 12 STEPHEN WILD
- 13 GARY MIDDLEHURST
- 14 KARL ASHALL
- 15 LEE HUDSON
- 16 JOE BURKE
- 17 STUART REARDON
- 19 PATRICK MOONEY
- 20 ELLIOT DAVIES
- 21 IAN MORT
- 22 ALEX THOMPSON
- 23 MARK HOBSON
- 24 ALEX DAVIDSON
- 25 OWAIN GRIFFITHS
- 26 CRAIG WHITE
- 27 ANDREW JOY
- 28 ANDREW OAKDEN

RLW PREDICTS: 1st



Adam Neal



OLDHAM

POSITIVES

Oldham have been so near to promotion for so many seasons that their supporters must be heartbroken with near miss after near miss. Coach Scott Naylor can be guaranteed to have his squad not only competitive but in the play-off mix, especially following the news of their partnership with Huddersfield Giants.

NEGATIVES

Oldham's close calls surely have to end at some stage - but with a much stronger competition in 2015 than last season, have the Roughyeds missed their best opportunity?

KEY LOSS

Scott Naylor lost two quality, free-scoring wingers in MO AGORO, who joined Hunslet Hawks, and DALE BLOOMFIELD (Rochdale Hornets) - they will take some replacing in 2015.

PROSPECTS

Bound to find it harder to achieve a promotion spot this year, but don't under-estimate the Roughyeds.

BIG YEAR FOR

Back rowers JOSH CROWLEY and DANNY LANGTREE have been as good as any at this level over the past two seasons, but may find themselves fighting for their places with the dual registered players likely to be offered by the Giants.

ONE TO WATCH

GARETH OWEN made his loan move from Salford Red Devils permanent during the close season and is sure to form an outstanding partnership around the ruck area with Adam Files.

KEY GAIN

Former Warrington and Salford prop ADAM NEAL looks a real coup for coach Naylor, having played his last rugby in Super League.



ROUGHYEDS 2015 SQUAD

ADAM CLAY
DAVID COOKSON
JOSH CROWLEY
TOM DEMPSEY
ADAM FILES
SAM GEE
JACK HOLMES
JAKE HUGHES
KENNY HUGHES
PHIL JOY
RICHARD JOY
DANNY LANGTREE
ADAM NEAL
STEVEN NIELD
GARETH OWEN
LEWIS PALFREY
STEVE ROPER
LIAM THOMPSON
GEORGE TYSON
JARROD WARD
MICHAEL WARD

SQUAD NUMBERS UNAVAILABLE AT THE TIME OF WRITING

RLW PREDICTS: 6th



Kash Watkins



OXFORD

POSITIVES

After a quiet start to the close season Oxford have recruited at a steady pace, including the appointment of a new coach in Tim Rumford, a man who holds coaching experience from various levels of the game.

ONE TO WATCH

Oxford have started recruiting from the local rugby union scene with EDD VICKERS and HENRY SWAILES joining from the Chinnor club. Winger Swailes is tipped for great things at the Iffley Road outfit, and is certainly worth keeping an eye on.

KEY LOSS

SEAN MORRIS had trials with London Broncos prior to the 2014 season and has finally made the move to the Championship outfit.

PROSPECTS

Oxford had seven wins to their name last term though only one of those were against sides from the heartlands of the game (York). It will be just as tough this year.

BIG YEAR FOR

TIM RUMFORD is in his first season as a head coach. However, he arrives at Oxford with plenty of experience under his belt and, by handing opportunities to a number of players from the National Conference Leagues, he's certainly made a bold move.

NEGATIVES

A number of experienced players have left the club along with former coach Tony Benson, so 2015 will be very much a new start for Oxford.



KEY GAIN

NATHAN KITSON has joined from the Bradford amateur club Dudley Hill where he has been one of the best hookers in the National Conference League. Coach Rumford says that he's never seen so many good luck messages as Kitson received from his former Hill teammates.

OXFORD 2015 SQUAD

DANNY ALLAN
JORDAN ANDRADE
JOHN JAMES BAIRD
SAM BLANEY
MARCUS BROOKER
KYLE DANNS
TOM DAVIES
LUKE EVANS
LUKE GARDINER
ED HAYLES
ANDREW HOGGINS
RICKY HOPWOOD
DANIEL IGBINEDION
AARON JONES-BISHOP
NATHAN KITSON
JAMIE MILBURN
JONNY MORRIS
WES NEWTON
GRAHAM O'KEEFFE
JONNY PAYNE
JACK PICKERILL
SIMON PRICE
LOUIS RICHARDS
JOSH SCOTT
ANDY SPEAKE
HENRY SWAILES
EDD VICKERS
KASH WATKINS

SQUAD NUMBERS NOT AVAILABLE AT THE TIME OF WRITING

RLW PREDICTS: 12th



Danny Bridge



ROCHDALE HORNETS

POSITIVES

Continuity. Hornets are once again in the capable hands of Ian Talbot, the former Wigan and Wakefield hooker now in his third season in charge. The club also continues its relationship with St Helens again for a third season.

NEGATIVES

Despite dropping down a division there have been no real dramas about relegation. However, Hornets will be looking to quickly put an end to a five-match losing run that closed their 2014 season.

KEY LOSS

Fijian World Cup stand-off RYAN MILLARD left Hornets to remain in the Championship, signing for promotion hopefuls Featherstone Rovers. That deal eventually fell through with Millard returning to Australia.

PROSPECTS

Rochdale will go well; their connection with St Helens is always positive and that will count in a competitive season. Their partnership club no longer have an arrangement with Whitehaven, which could mean that Hornets get some higher profile players this term.

BIG YEAR FOR

DANNY BRIDGE. The former Warrington Wolves forward, younger brother of Chris, gets the opportunity to cement a regular place at senior level. Following a disruptive 2014 season, which involved a loan spell at Bradford, he'll be looking to fulfil his potential with the Hornets.

ONE TO WATCH

DANNY YATES. The livewire scrum-half came through the academy system at St Helens. He's then progressed further with spells at French club UTC and Halifax, which also included a loan period with London Skolars.

KEY GAIN

DALE BLOOMFIELD. The former Hornets winger returns to the club after a two-year stint with Oldham. Always a consistent try-scorer, a valuable asset at this level.

HORNETS 2015 SQUAD

- 1 WAYNE ENGLISH
- 2 GARETH LANGLEY
- 3 DAVE LLEWELLYN
- 4 LEE PATERSON
- 5 DALE BLOOMFIELD
- 6 PAUL CROOK
- 7 DANNY YATES
- 8 JOHN COOKSON
- 9 ALEX MCCLURG
- 10 WARREN THOMPSON
- 11 JORDAN CASE
- 12 ALEX TRUMPER
- 13 TONY SUFFOLK
- 14 JAMES TILLEY
- 15 LEWIS SHERIDAN
- 16 LIAM GILCHRIST
- 17 SAM BROOKS
- 18 DEAN MIGNACCA
- 19 DANNY BRIDGE
- 20 BRAD HARGREAVES
- 21 RYAN SMITH
- 22 MIKE RATU
- 23 JAMES DANDY
- 24 DAVE HULL
- 25 STE MARSH
- 29 JACK FRANCIS
- 30 DANNY DAVIES



Paul Emanuelli



SOUTH WALES SCORPIONS

POSITIVES

The Scorpions have a bunch of enthusiastic workers off the field, none more so than head coach Mike Grady who works tirelessly for the club. He's firm in his commitment and belief that the Scorpions need to build a strong Welsh base for their long-term survival, and that's to be applauded.

NEGATIVES

The Scorpions found wins few and far between in 2014 and there's a realistic fear that could be the case in 2015.

KEY LOSS

Skipper PHIL CARLETON, who made 17 appearances in 2014, has departed to head up the coaching set-up at the new Cardiff City amateur club. He'll still be in contact with the Scorpions but to lose an experienced player during a rebuilding process is far from ideal.

PROSPECTS

The Scorpions will probably find 2015 just as tough as last year was on the field. However, there's much enthusiasm for the game in South Wales and hopefully the club can gain some reward for their enthusiastic following.

BIG YEAR FOR

CONNOR FARRER, the highly-rated young hooker has been named as the Scorpions new captain in 2015, replacing the departed Carleton.



ONE TO WATCH

Again FARRER - he was the Scorpions top try scorer in 2014 and would be a good bet to repeat that feat this year.

KEY GAIN

Aberbeeg-born prop forward ANTHONY SYMONS came through the Celtic Crusaders academy five years ago and returned to the Rugby League fold with the Scorpions during the winter months.

SCORPIONS 2015 SQUAD

ASHLEY BATEMAN
ROSS BEVAN
PHIL CARLETON
MIKE CONNOR
NEIL DALLIMORE
DARRYL DAVIES
RHYS DAVIES
RICHARD EAST
PAUL EDWARDS
PAUL EMANUELLI
MORGAN EVANS
CONNOR FARRER
SCOTT GILES
DAFYDD HELLARD
CRAIG LEWIS
DAF LLOYD
IAN NEWBURY
LLOYD O'CONNOR,
SHAUN OWENS
TALA PETELO
BARRIE PHILLIPS
OSIAN PHILLIPS
JACK PRING
KYLE SCRIVENS
JORDAN SHERIDAN
PAUL SONGHURST
ANTHONY SYMONS
LEWIS TUTT
MARCUS WEBB
MATTHEW WILCOX

SQUAD NUMBERS NOT AVAILABLE AT THE TIME OF WRITING

RLW PREDICTS: 13th



Ritchie Hawkyard



SWINTON LIONS

POSITIVES

The Lions will go it alone in 2015 after ditching their partnership agreement with Warrington Wolves. There's a positive vibe around the club with coach John Duffy making some exciting signings and the club active again in the local community.



NEGATIVES

It's difficult to think of any negativity at the Lions at the moment with the club progressing well on and off the field.

KEY LOSS

LUKE MENZIES, a mainstay of their team in the 2014 season, has joined Salford Red Devils as he looks to break into Super League.

PROSPECTS

Swinton are another team sure to do well in 2015 and looked well placed to be firmly involved in the promotion shake-up come the end of the campaign.

BIG YEAR FOR

ANDY ACKERS. Returned to Swinton after a one-month loan trial at his original club, Warrington, in January. Could be a key player for the Lions this year.

ONE TO WATCH

BEN AUSTIN joined from Wigan Warriors along with back row talent Grant Beecham during the close season. Wigan produced too many players to be promoted to their first team and this pair certainly have talent despite their tender years. With Beecham injured for much of 2014 Austin may well be the one to watch this season.

KEY GAIN

BEN WHITE. Progressed through the Academy ranks at Leeds Rhinos and was allowed to join the University of Gloucestershire All Golds last term, where he was impressive with seven tries in 12 outings.

LIONS 2015 SQUAD

- 1 RITCHIE HAWKYARD
- 2 SHAUN ROBINSON
- 3 STUART LITTLER
- 4 MICK NANYN
- 5 ALEX HURST
- 6 BEN WHITE
- 7 CHRIS ATKIN
- 8 MICK MORRISON
- 9 ANDY ACKERS
- 10 BEN AUSTIN
- 11 GRANT BEECHAM
- 12 DARREN HAWKYARD
- 13 TOMMY GALLAGHER
- 14 LEWIS HULME
- 16 JIMMY ROWLAND
- 17 IAIN MORRISON
- 18 AARON LLOYD
- 19 JACK MORRISON
- 21 ANDY BALL
- 22 CHRIS ROTHWELL
- 23 CONNOR DWYER
- 24 JORDAN JAMES
- 25 HARRY AARONSON
- 27 LIAM COLEMAN
- MICK GOVIN
- MATT GARDNER



Steve Parry



UNIV. GLOUCS ALL GOLDS

POSITIVES

The All Golds are a vibrant, progressive and relatively new club who have appointed an enthusiastic head coach in Lee Greenwood. Their strategy has focused on recruiting younger players to grow with the club and they have made some astute signings who should progress well at this level.

NEGATIVES

As a consequence of their recruitment policy there may be a question mark on whether the club has enough experience in their ranks.

KEY LOSS

Gloucestershire were at their best in 2014 under the guidance of STEVE MCCORMACK; having an international coach in charge of a third tier club was a real bonus last season. He will undoubtedly be missed.

PROSPECTS

Another side who will face a tough time against the top clubs but who could well pick up some surprise victories.

BIG YEAR FOR

LEE GREENWOOD has had a good grounding as assistant to Karl Harrison at Halifax and in charge at Siddal and Calderdale College. Now has the opportunity to progress his career with the All Golds.



ONE TO WATCH

JOE MARTIN. Greenwood has done a shrewd piece of recruitment in getting this Halifax fullback on a season-long loan deal. Martin impressed in a spell with Gateshead last term.

KEY GAIN

His signing was only confirmed days before the start of the club's pre-season warm-up matches, but EMMERSON WHITTEL was always a consistent performer in the Bradford under-19s and he should go well for the All Golds.

ALL GOLDS 2015 SQUAD

- 1 PHIL COWBURN
- 2 SCOTT CLARIDGE
- 3 LEWIS REECE
- 4 CALLUM MULKEEN
- 5 YANNIC PARKER
- 6 TOBY TOPHAM
- 7 MATT BRADLEY
- 8 OLLIE PURSLOW
- 9 STEVE PARRY
- 10 IZAAK DUFFY
- 11 DANNY SPENCER-TONKS
- 12 BRAD ADAMS
- 13 CHRIS VITALINI
- 14 JOE MCLEAN
- 15 CASEY CANTERBURY
- 16 ASH HAYNES
- 17 JAMIE WALTER
- 18 JAMIE CROWTHER
- 19 BRETT SCRIVENS
- 20 COURTNEY DAVIES
- 21 RORY SHARRATT
- 22 BRAD MAIS
- 23 JOE MARTIN
- 24 TIM STEVENSON
- 25 LUKE KELL
- 26 IAN CLARK
- 27 DANNY FALLON
- 28 RYAN PYWELL
- 29 JOEL THOMAS
- 30 EMMERSON WHITTEL

RLW PREDICTS: 11th



James Haynes



YORK CITY KNIGHTS

POSITIVES

The Knights had an excellent regular season in 2014 and with the majority of that squad intact, new coach James Ford has the ideal opportunity to make sure that they are a competitive force in what will be a stronger competition this year.

NEGATIVES

The off-field saga about where the Knights will play, and train, in 2015. Hopefully, the recently appointed directors can help resolve the outstanding issues.

KEY LOSS

BEN REYNOLDS was on dual registration from Castleford Tigers in 2014 and has been snapped up by Leigh Centurions. Reynolds is a match-winner - the Knights need another.

PROSPECTS

Missed out in a three-team race for promotion last term after a successful league season, 2015 will be much tougher and if they can make the play-off final this year they will have done well.

BIG YEAR FOR

JAMES FORD in his first senior coaching role. The off field challenges faced by Ford in his first few months in charge have really seen him thrown in at the deep end.

ONE TO WATCH

A wildcard selection here for PETER ASPINALL, who bashed it down the middle for Sheffield Eagles last term but looks set to be used more on the edge by the Knights. That looks an astute move, a subtle change that should suit the former Huddersfield junior.

KEY GAIN

MARK APPLGARTH has always been a respected and consistent performer and returns to the club in a player/assistant coach role.



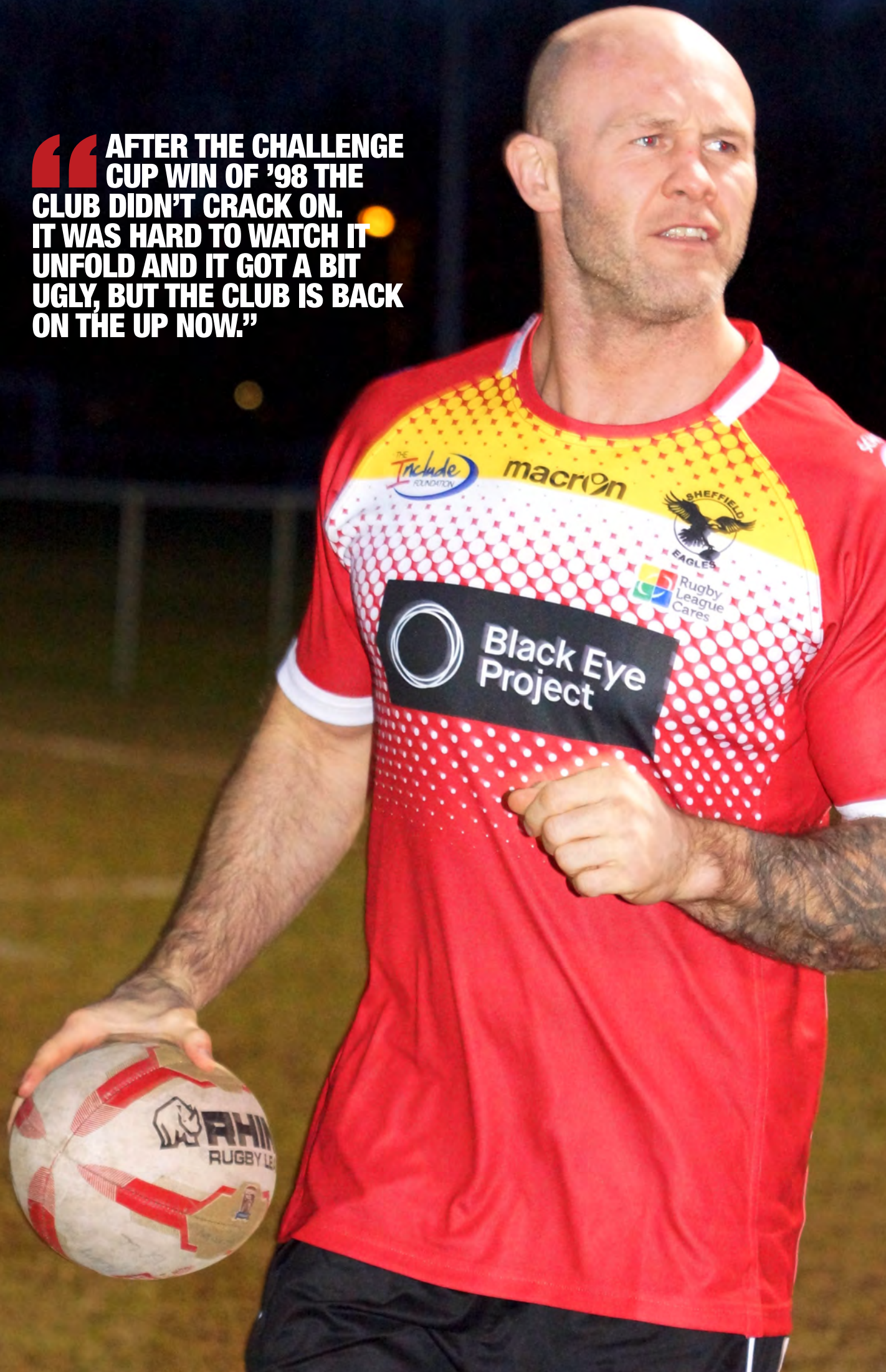
KNIGHTS 2015 SQUAD

JACK ALDOUS
MARK APPLGARTH
PETER ASPINALL
AUSTIN BELL
KRIS BRINING
HARRY CARTER
JAMEL CHISHOLM
TYLER CRAIG
LIAM CUNNINGHAM
ADAM DENT
BEN DENT
JACK GLOVER
COREY HANSON
JAMES HAYNES
JACK ILEY
JAKE JOYNT
JAY LEARY
RYAN MALLINDER
GREG MINIKIN
NEV MORRISON
BRAD NICHOLSON
JOSH NICKLIN
JACK PICKLES
JON PRESLEY
COLTON ROCHE
ED SMITH
PAT SMITH
JOSH TONKS

SQUAD NUMBERS NOT AVAILABLE AT THE TIME OF WRITING

RLW PREDICTS: 8th

“AFTER THE CHALLENGE CUP WIN OF '98 THE CLUB DIDN'T CRACK ON. IT WAS HARD TO WATCH IT UNFOLD AND IT GOT A BIT UGLY, BUT THE CLUB IS BACK ON THE UP NOW.”



SENIOR SERVICE

After starting his career at Sheffield Eagles as a player, Keith Senior is back where it started on the coaching staff. MATTHEW SHAW reports.

TONGUES WERE WAGGING ON THE eve of the new season as Keith Senior announced his intent to return to the playing field. The Super League original was making his comeback for the game's new era and, after claiming five winners' rings at the Leeds Rhinos, was returning to his roots at the club where it all started, Sheffield Eagles.

Or so it seemed.

Unfortunately for the Eagles, but most fortunately for the other sides in the Championship, Senior had instead fallen victim to a mischievous hoax.

"I accidentally left my phone unlocked in the physio room," Senior explained. "I still don't know who did it, but someone tweeted that I was making a comeback. They'd put that I was pleased to announce I was making my return and going back to my roots. My phone went crazy with journalists giving me calls asking what the scoop was."

However, Senior revealed to Rugby League World that Sheffield head coach Mark Aston, who Senior is assistant to at the South Yorkshire club, had already attempted to talk him into a return last season.

"All last season we were really struggling with injuries. It was so bad that Mark was trying to get both me and Dave Larder to play! We particularly struggled in the centre position on the right. We had players out of position, the young kids coming through weren't quite ready and we really struggled. It was hinted at but it wasn't something I was ever really contemplating."

Sadly, the knee injury that forced

Senior to prematurely end his career in 2012 continues to hinder him, and was the main reason why Senior's fantasy return did not become reality.

"The knee won't bend further than 90 degrees now. If I was 20-odd years old it would be worth risking, but I turn 39 next month and it just seems a little crazy at my ripe old age.

"I miss playing a lot. You're always going to think you could do better when you look back. When I was forced to retire through injury I felt I had a lot more left to give. I can't be too bitter, I had a brilliant career and there are a lot of players who aren't as fortunate. It wasn't nice to be unable to end my career on my own terms but as the old cliché goes 'as one door closes another one opens.'"

LEAGUE TO THE CORE

And so has been the case with Senior, who has made the transition from player to coach at the Eagles having become Aston's assistant ahead of last season.

"It has been interesting. It can be infuriating because I see potential in certain individuals but they just seem comfortable where they are and that's frustrating for me. For their potential there are players at the club that could push on a lot further and that's the challenge, trying to break down those barriers in their attitude.

"It is great being back in that environment and it does get the mind ticking, I've had many sleepless nights just thinking about how we could do something better, or (about) our game

plans and that's the challenge that lies ahead. I only know Rugby League. I started out as a HGV mechanic but I could never go back into that, so apart from Rugby League I know nothing else.

"Dealing with individuals has been an eye-opener too. Coaching a player like Menzie (Yere) can be a little bit difficult at times with his broken English, but you have got to work with the qualities he has and the fans love what he does.

"He's a fan favourite because he can score tries, he puts some big shots on and gets a little crazy when he tries to put the hits on but it is entertaining. He's been one of the finds of the Championship really."

Senior's progression as a coach had been aided by his ability to work alongside Aston, who has done a wonderful job of rejuvenating the Eagles over the past 16 years, transforming them from wounded giants back into a team that can realistically fight for the chance to compete with the big boys once more.

"We challenge ourselves as coaches," Senior said. "There is myself, Dave Larder, and Mark Aston and we have good debates and that's what it is all about because we all have different styles. That's a great quality of Mark, he wants challenging, someone who will disagree and challenge him and he'll want to know why.

"Whatever he says goes, but if I believe something else will work he'll be open to taking my way of thinking on board and that's something I respect and admire him for."

»

SUPER LEAGUE RETURN?

The trio are in the process of plotting the Eagles' flight back into the Super League, an unenviable task given the competition that surrounds them. Pay packets are unlikely to come by the wad full at Sheffield in comparison to some rival Championship clubs, yet their ambitions are equally high.

"The new league structure wasn't a concept I was fully behind to start with, but looking back at the opportunities that it gives to teams outside Super League I think it is an entertaining prospect. It's the season-long excitement with everything always to play for that makes it exciting to be a part of. There is a lot of money to be won and lost for Championship and Super League clubs respectively.

"We're realistic, we're not in a position to pay big wages even though we've spent a lot more money than in previous seasons, because we've realised how important making that top four is. As a club we don't believe in spending what we haven't got, it's as simple as that.

"Super League is a big ask. We have to be progressive. We want a solid season to help us bring in more big names, then we want to have more full-time players, and then when we have the stadium up and running all the pieces start coming together until we're in a position to compete for Super League.

"It has taken the club 15 years to reach the position it is in now so we know how long it takes to build, but we know we will do it the right way and not try and force ourselves into a position that isn't sustainable."

OUT OF THE ASHES

Senior was part of the Sheffield side that famously defeated Wigan in the 1998 Challenge Cup final, a result that is still regarded by many as the greatest shock in the competition's 120 year history. His performance saw him attract the attentions of Leeds, eventually joining the Rhinos in 1999, and the rest is history, with Senior going on to become a key figure in one of the most dominant Super League sides ever.

The next decade wasn't so rosy for Sheffield, however. Despite their Challenge Cup success, the club found itself in financial difficulty. Crowds never improved and with money short, the club entered the infamous merger with Huddersfield, which ended with Sheffield



I ONLY KNOW RUGBY LEAGUE. I STARTED OUT AS A HGV MECHANIC BUT I COULD NEVER GO BACK INTO THAT, SO APART FROM RUGBY LEAGUE I KNOW NOTHING ELSE."

ceasing to exist as a club before Aston turned things around.

It's a period that sits uneasy with the former Great Britain centre, who was anguished by his former team's struggles.

"After the Challenge Cup win of '98 the club didn't crack on like it should have done, but finances determined a lot of that and that's when the merger came along. Don Valley was never a great stadium for Rugby League. You couldn't generate an atmosphere and that's why the fans never came in like they should. It was hard to watch it unfold and it got a bit ugly, but the club is back on the up now.

"The new stadium will hopefully bring in more fans. When we left Don Valley we went to Owlerton which wasn't ideal, but needs must. Moving to Doncaster is a good move but it won't garner the fans we're hoping for. It'll be interesting to see

what the new stadium ends up doing for our fan base.

"But now there's a great board fully behind what we do and the future is looking bright. We just need to make sure we put in the performances on the field and get rid of the stigma that Sheffield is in South Yorkshire and out of the way. Hopefully by signing a player like Jamie Langley who is a proven Super League star, we can start attracting more of those big names."

So, as Senior's development as a coach continues, can we one day expect to see him take the hot seat as a head coach?

"I've always said I never see myself as one because it is a ruthless industry. I always saw myself going into the youth development side of things. But the more time I'm getting stuck into it at Sheffield and challenging myself, the more I fancy it." ●

Leigh Centurions at
an earlier visit to Lowton
West primary school



EDUCATING LEIGH

Gareth Walker spent a morning with Leigh Centurions Community Trust as they spread both Rugby League and good values into local schools

AS LEIGH COACH PAUL ROWLEY stands in front of an assembly full of primary school children and tells them “the person you are is just as important as how good you are at sport”, you can hear a pin drop.

Rowley, plus first team prop Tom Spencer, club owner Derek Beaumont and historian Mike Latham, are at the Sacred Heart Primary School in Hindsford to give the latests in a series of presentations to the borough’s youngsters.

Chairman Mike Norris and reserves coach Paul Anderson have also been involved in the project, co-ordinated by Hannah Forbes and Heather Parker from Leigh Community Trust, of which Rowley is a patron.

It’s a programme that saw them visit 32 schools over the Christmas and New Year period, taking with them the assortment of silverware the club won in 2014 and promoting not only the club and Rugby League, but life skills and values.

“When I speak to a new player I want to get to know him as a person, and make sure he’s going to be very caring and supportive of his teammates,” Rowley adds. “Being able to work together as a team is as important as anything.”

Prior to Rowley’s contribution, Latham - a long-term journalist, historian and supporter of the game who has significantly aided the Centurions’ recent



revival - has given the children a potted history of the club, telling them how 10,000 Leigh people walked to the 1921 Challenge Cup final at Broughton.

Head of rugby Beaumont offers them an insight into his own story, building his business up from nothing and overcoming adversity en route.

“My mum and dad split up when I was younger, but that doesn’t mean you can’t achieve what you want to,” Beaumont says. Again, the room is silent.

“Do your best at school and in everything that you do. I wanted to be a priest when I was at school and my first job was at a hairdressers.”

The children are then shown a motivational video of Leigh’s 2014 success, with The Script and will.i.am’s song lyrics declaring “the world’s gonna know your name”.

Still, the children remain transfixed by what they’re being shown - something Beaumont later commends them on,

telling them they have been the best behaved school they’ve been at to date.

It continues when Latham interviews first team player Spencer, and then into a Q&A session with all four men. Rowley explains how his dad Allan inspired him to start playing rugby, Beaumont tells them that if playing sport isn’t their strongest point then they can focus on business and become a director later in life.

Later, Rugby League World chats to a small selection of Year 6 pupils who can barely contain their excitement at what they’ve just seen, pledging to start watching the Centurions if they aren’t already fans.

By the end of the assembly, it’s difficult not to become a supporter of Leigh Centurions myself.

They are far from the only club doing this kind of work in the local community, and its value, in whatever town, should not be underestimated.

Beaumont added: “We are very proud to go around the local area and share our success with our future spectators, players, staff and directors.

“We have been extremely impressed with the qualities and discipline instilled into the local schools by the teachers - the attention and manners of the pupils have been first-class.

“The teachers in our local community should be very proud of what they are achieving.”

And so should Leigh Centurions. ●

BIG BANG THEORY

THE OPENING ROUND OF OUR

campaign saw us face the competition favourites Bradford Bulls in a mouth-watering clash that had everyone in Rugby League talking. And it didn't disappoint on any level.

The marketing of the game was excellent and both clubs should be congratulated on how they promoted the match, making it a huge success not only for the two teams involved but the Championship as a whole. To achieve an attendance of 7,449 - which incidentally beat three Super League attendances that weekend - is an outstanding achievement, and if anyone had any doubts whether promotion and relegation is good for the game, just sit back and take note.

As for the match itself, Bradford started like a house on fire. I wouldn't say we were nervous and I wouldn't say the occasion got to us - in fact I would probably say the opposite, in that we were too eager to please and wanted to get stuck into Bradford. We didn't control our emotion in the correct manner in terms of our process and the execution of our skill. Bradford took full advantage of that and certainly made us pay by scoring some nice tries.

We only managed to score one first half try through myself, but all the hard work was done by Martin Ridyard's nice kick, which I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time for.

At half-time most people would have assumed that Paul Rowley would come in screaming and shouting, but we players know our coach better than that. To be honest he didn't need to say much - we knew we weren't good enough in that first half and the common theme around the dressing room was that we just needed to calm down and gain some composure.

REFEREEING ISSUES

Our team has enough talent to score points, and sure enough once we regained that composure, we managed to win the second half 30-4 without really playing to the best of our ability. Still at full-time we weren't overly excited with ourselves as we know we are capable of much better.

So although we were happy with the



“ IF ANYONE HAD ANY DOUBTS WHETHER PROMOTION AND RELEGATION IS GOOD FOR THE GAME, SIT BACK AND TAKE NOTE.”

two points, we have got some major improvements in us and hopefully we can get these fixed up as soon as possible. With Paul Rowley being our coach and the perfectionist that he is, I'm sure it won't take long.

Both sets of fans should be applauded on the atmosphere created at the Leigh Sports Village, it made it a great occasion to be involved in and I'm sure fellow players feel the same way.

After the game a lot was said from the Bradford camp about their disappointment in the officiating from

Joe Cobb, but in a game where both teams had three men sin binned and with such a high number of penalties given, it's my opinion that the two teams were guilty of making it a very difficult day for the ref. Thankfully for us this is one of the areas we fixed up in the second half and we finally got into a rhythm and scored some points.

It's been mentioned that this was like a cup final for the Centurions and the relevance of the game played down from the Bulls, but I feel Bradford's opponents each week will approach the game with



Sneaking through for a try
in the 13th minute

the same mentality. They will face a cup final approach each and every week, as they are the team whose own CEO went on record as saying nothing less than first place will do, and they also carry the burden of being the Championship favourites.

SHIFTING THE PRESSURE

Bradford have had a very long pre-season, and like every team will have been training very hard, so to lose their opening game must have been very disappointing and frustrating - as it would have been for us had we lost. It is something we spoke about in the week



New signing Fuifui Moimoi
made his competitive debut

that Bradford are under huge pressure this year as favourites to go straight back up.

I think this is where being the underdog suits us better this year; we are a bit more relaxed about the situation and take every game as it comes. We certainly didn't treat the Bradford game any different to any other game but understood the importance to our supporters and were excited by the interest surrounding this fixture.

We have reviewed the game now and came to the conclusion that we were happy with the result but not happy with our performance so we will train hard to fix things up and go about our business

quietly, which is a lot easier this year as London and Bradford will attract all the headlines. I wouldn't say the game set a marker for us as such and I believe both teams will get better. If we fix our issues up we can maintain a strong challenge for one of the top four places.

The Bradford game wasn't the be all and end all for us by any means, we live on the philosophy of one game at a time and see where it takes us.

Lastly, again thanks to everyone involved at both clubs - it was a great day and hopefully the Championship sees more of these occasions as it can only be good for Rugby League in general. ●

SHARK TALES



Nigel Wiskar's latest League journey sees him discover a French revolution taking place in the unlikely surroundings of Surrey

JEAN-VALERY GARCIA COULDN'T be more French if he was puffing on a Gauloises and wearing a beret. His mannerisms, the shrugs and an infectious roguish charm tick all the boxes.

At one point we chat about wine, naturally, but it's a distraction. We are here to talk about the French revolution he's aiming to conjure up in a London commuter suburb just outside the M25.

That involves a dynamic rebrand of a club and bringing in a core of experienced players - from over the channel.

Jean-Valery arrived in the Surrey town of Guildford in 2008 and soon decided to sponsor the Giants side which plays in the South East and London division of the Conference.

Apart from the 2010 season when they were beaten by Greenwich Admirals in the divisional final, the club were middling along and had struggled to make a real impact.

Jean-Valery tried his hand at coaching them...a total disaster, as he readily admits.

So he decided it was time for

a shake-up, a reboot and more importantly some help from home on the playing field.

"It simply wasn't working with the Giants," he tells me over a coffee in a cafe in London's Piccadilly, "so I decided we needed a new name.

"Last year I'd brought some French guys over to play so it seemed a good idea to change the name of the team to Foreign Legion Rugby League.

"Marketing wise it was perfect. We had players from rugby union, the French thing was there and I thought we could make a real connection.

"But I got some opposition to the name and eventually I realised there would be a lot of issues with that name."

History, particularly the novel *Beau Geste*, takes a romantic view of the Legion as a place where wronged men leave behind their old lives and start a new one. In reality it is an elite, highly-decorated fighting unit.

You can see where JV, as he is known, was coming from.

He continues: "When that didn't work I thought again. I thought we had to get rid of the Guildford Giants so

“LAST YEAR I'D BROUGHT SOME FRENCH GUYS OVER TO PLAY SO IT SEEMED A GOOD IDEA TO CHANGE THE NAME OF THE TEAM TO FOREIGN LEGION RUGBY LEAGUE.”



Chairman Jean-Valery Garcia and his Surrey Sharks, and his six year-old son Jean-Michel Garcia (right)

we'll use the word Surrey. And what goes well with the word Surrey? Why the shark of course!

"Our colour was blue so that worked. I'm not a dictator but I told everyone they could take it or leave it," he jokes.

EXOTIC MIX

And so Surrey Sharks was born. New name, new kit and a chance to push that brand at a modern, well-equipped playing base.

Rugby League is in the chairman's blood. His dad Jean Garcia played for Racing Club Albi XIII, which is near Toulouse. JV cut his teeth playing for Begles XIII in the Rugby League wasteland near Bordeaux.

When he decided to kick start the Sharks he sought French blood to give them a lift. And this season they will have a French coach and three players from over the channel.

Ladislav Lapelleterie will take charge of the team. He's a former under-17s



international who won trophies as a player with Toulouse side TOC XIII and Lezignan XIII.

In the second row there's Alexandre Anger - a great name for a Rugby League forward - who's played the game since he was four.

There's Damien Lacombe from the Trentels club in the south west of France who will play fullback or stand-off.

And completing the revolution is stand-off Jonathan Garcia who played for Toulon after a stint in union with Guadalajara Rhinos in Mexico - although his contribution this year will be limited by a serious injury.

An exotic mix then.

"They bring experience and hopefully a spine for the team," Jean-Valery adds.

"It's a requirement they speak



WISKAR'S RUGBY LEAGUE ADVENTURES

English but if you have players in the key positions who've been brought up playing the game I believe that makes a real difference.

"We've also got a guy from the Czech Republic who'll turn out for us. He's a big lad who's played for his country."

That's Jiri Novak from Pardubice Jets who has represented the Czech Republic against BARLA and the likes of Norway and Ukraine.

PLUSH HOME

Jean-Valery says: "Bringing in experienced French players is something I'm looking at short-term and on an annual basis this strategy will work."

"But it's high risk longer term and of course we will be working a lot on the youth set-up here. We run three junior teams now but want to expand and hopefully create a girls' branch next year."

He adds: "Our credibility comes with playing at Surrey Sports Park. A thousand people visit here every day and the facilities are second to none."

"There's a pool, gym, 4G pitch, indoor facilities, Starbucks. And our name will be on the boards outside so everyone will see it."

The park is close to the Surrey University campus and the stadium hosted all the group games in the 2010 women's Rugby Union World Cup.

Harlequins use it now and it will become the training base for Ireland, Italy and Georgia later in the year for the men's union World Cup.



**I'M NOT A DICTATOR
BUT I TOLD
EVERYONE THEY COULD
TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT."**

The club have brought in cheerleaders from the University of Surrey for next season and there'll be a shark mascot at home games too - though the chairman smiles and shakes his head when I suggest he could take the role.

They've a cool shirt with a raging Jaws on it and more merchandise will follow. "We've got some nice stash!" says JV. "Kids love it and tell their parents to buy it."

Jean-Valery had been at a meeting at the London Geological Society on the day we hook up. I was half expecting to be met by a nutty professor.

Instead, the 39 year old is dressed in a sharp suit befitting his day job as a regional manager in a company which examines core samples for the oil industry.

I finish by asking this pioneering Frenchman if he has tried English wine, an increasingly growing market in the south of England.

He replies with a grin: "Yes...and I will never try it again."

It seems even this French revolution has its limits. ●

GHANAIAIN AID

The club is giving away their old Guildford Giants kit to help develop the game in Ghana.

About 40 adult and 50 kids' kits will be used for the senior club championship and schools championship.

Sharks are teaming up with AMT InterCarco, a freight company who will cover all shipping costs to the African country.

SHARK TWINS

One Surrey Sharks, there's only one Surrey Sharks. Er actually, that's not strictly true - the English outfit share their name with a hockey club in British Columbia.

The Canadians got there first as they were formed in 1995 and run eight women's teams and one men's.

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NEW FRONTIERS

JOANNA LESTER
begins a new series
of columns on Rugby
League in Papua
New Guinea

WHILE THE NRL HAS LONG BEEN Papua New Guinea's favourite television product, the Australian Rugby League body has been quietly building its presence on the ground in PNG through its sport-for-development arm.

Since 2013, the NRL has been running League Bilong Laif (League for Life), a schools-based program that uses the monumental popularity of the NRL in PNG to encourage kids to engage with learning and respect others. The program is entirely funded by the Australian government and regularly attracts ministerial visits, but is still largely unknown to most Australia-based NRL fans.

So far, League Bilong Laif has been running in the capital, Port Moresby, Goroka (Rugby League's mist-shrouded Highlands heartland) and Kokopo (the island home of Queensland Cup side PNG Hunters). But the NRL's wings are about to spread further to Bougainville, an autonomous region of Papua New Guinea that is still rebuilding after years of civil war and could become the world's newest country later this decade when it is expected to hold a referendum on separating from PNG. Watch out Rugby League World Cup 2021...

LO POINT

The shock return of Newcastle Thunder recruit Garry Lo in January was the biggest Rugby League controversy in PNG since... his unexpected switch from PNG Hunters to the club formerly known as Gateshead in October.

The move raised eyebrows at the time, not least because Lo, the Queensland Cup 2014 top try scorer, was tipped to attract the attention of NRL clubs in the near future. Barely had the dust settled on Lo's surprise move to League 1 to unite with Kumul mentor



Stanley Gene, before the 22-year-old landed back in Port Moresby in mysterious circumstances.

Social media was awash with rumours about Lo's late-night escape from the house he shared with fellow Papua New Guineans Mark Mexico, Jason Tali and Charlie Wabo. Lo claimed he was let down over promises regarding living and playing conditions, with reports that he expected to be playing Super League before 2015 was out.

Now he may struggle to get back into the Hunters squad, and has signed for hometown club Mount Hagen Eagles in the PNG domestic competition to start re-building his reputation. If nothing else, the incident underlines the competing pressures on young PNG players from clubs, coaches, peers and families as

Schoolgirls in Port Moresby get their first taste of tag rugby league through the NRL's League Bilong Laif program.
Photo: Joanna Lester.

the rise of the Hunters propels previously unknown names into the global shop window.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

After the Hunters' remarkable debut season in last year's Queensland Cup (in which they missed out on the finals by a single point), expectations are high going into 2015.

Thanks to a new broadcast deal with the rapidly expanding communications and media giant, Digicel, all Hunters games, both home and away, will be televised live in PNG, making them the only club along with New Zealand Warriors to enjoy such broadcasting arrangements.

However, watching the games requires the purchase of a new set-top box costing 169 Kina (about £40), an unaffordable luxury for many Papua New Guineans who are upset that Hunters games will no longer be viewable on free-to-air channels.

WHAT OFF-SEASON?

In the only country in the world that calls Rugby League its national sport, the action never stops.



The PNG side for the Prime Minister's XIII match with kids participating in the NRL's League Bilong Laif program.
Photo: Rocky Roe.

Indeed, this 'off-season' has seen a row about there being too much of it, with different organisations running competing off-season leagues.

Names and affiliations aside, the gravel and mud pitches of Port Moresby are frequently occupied with formal and informal Rugby League action. This off-season has featured a heavy focus on Nines tournaments ahead of the Port Moresby 2015 Pacific Games (coming soon to an as-yet-unbuilt stadium near you) which will feature a Rugby League Nines event comprising nine Pacific nations, some of which may see even the most dedicated RLW readers reaching for an atlas (Tokelau, anyone?).

PNG's recent participation in Sydney's annual Cabramatta Nines tournament, using a squad comprising several players from the 2014 Commonwealth Nines in Glasgow, has set the tone for a young Kumuls side to feature at the Pacific Games, but the PNGRFL has not ruled out calling in some bigger names nearer the time. ●

RLW correspondent Joanna Lester is currently based in Papua New Guinea, working as a Media and Communications Advisor for the NRL.

INTERNATIONAL ROUND-UP

HEADINGLEY HOSTS INTERNATIONAL

Belgium and Malta will meet at Headingley Carnegie in a curtain-raiser to the round 19 Super League clash between Leeds Rhinos and Hull FC on Sunday, June 21.

Leeds Rhinos chief executive Gary Hetherington said the club is excited about bringing the RLEF sanctioned international to Leeds.

"We are very much looking forward to welcoming the Rugby League fans of Malta and Belgium and those with an interest in seeing the further expansion of the sport across Europe," he said.

"I'm sure the Leeds Rhinos and Hull FC fans will create a great atmosphere and make it an occasion to remember for both nations."

Belgium's newly appointed head coach, former Junior Kiwis, Leigh and Oxford boss Tony Benson says the international will be a test of their progress.

Benson said: "We are working our way through an elite programme to develop the athletes of Belgium Rugby League and we see this as a significant signpost."

SPANISH LESSONS

Rugby League is being introduced to schools in Spain with the first part of a programme launched successfully in Guadassuar, Valencia.

More than 100 children aged between eight and 14 participated in the two days led by Tony Palacios, director of the college of Spanish referees and Aitor Dávila, director of college coaches.

Palacios said: "It wasn't easy to co-ordinate so many children in just two days but the experience was fantastic for everyone."

"They could not wait to tell us how much they had enjoyed it, as did their teachers, and it is possible that Rugby League will be included in the school studies plan of Guadassuar next year."

BELGIAN QUALIFICATIONS

Six Belgian coaches have passed their Level One training as part of the latest stage of the joint RLEF-EU Leadership Devolution Project in Brussels led by RLEF Coaching Manager Martin Crick, and involving delegates from Belgium and the Netherlands.

The Dutch tutors were on hand to gain important on-the-job training, assess the Belgian tutor-trainees and strengthen ties with their neighbours.

Two of the three Dutch tutors received their tutor status, marking a major step forward in the game in the Low Countries.

Crick said: "There was a lot of youthful enthusiasm that promises a bright future for Rugby League in Belgium."

"The sport is still very new there and the nominated technical leaders are drawn from a varied sporting background, predominantly martial arts, but also tennis, so it is interesting to see the progress the trainee educators are making."

MIDDLE EAST PROMISE

Lebanon's under-18s defeated their Saudi Select counterparts in both games played in Beirut last month to take the MEA Junior Championship.

The young Cedars won the first match, played in stormy, cold conditions, 18-4 before turning on the style with a 40-6 victory.

Saudi Arabia RL Association chairman David Kinead said: "These were probably the most physical games that Saudi and Lebanon have played in my time as head coach."

"What was most pleasing was the high level of skill on display. Both sides have made huge strides forward in terms of technique and playing ability."

"We are disappointed to lose but want to congratulate the Lebanese on a terrific series."

FIELDS OF DREAMS

RUGBY LEAGUE'S BIG PROBLEM

over the years is that it never dreamed big enough. But could we be in danger of entering another era where our dreams are too big?

The two proposals I am addressing here are kicking off the NRL season at Wembley and taking the World Club Series to Dubai, Abu Dhabi or Hong Kong.

Bondi Beat is not for a moment suggesting these things will never happen. Hell, we're firm believers down here on Campbell Parade that there will eventually be a trans-hemisphere club competition and we're arguing in favour of a London team in the NRL.

But when we don't put the proper foundations in place, we get the Adelaide Rams and the Cardiff City Blue Dragons.

Readers of this column would not have been surprised to hear that South Sydney and Brisbane at one stage considered staying on after the World Club Series to kick off the NRL regular season at Wembley.

Clearly, the likes of NRL chief executive David Smith have seen other foreign sporting competitions play matches in London, looked at the attendances at World Cup double headers and Challenge Cup finals and started counting the cash.

As most of you know all too well, it's not as simple as that.

Firstly, the Challenge Cup final is a cultural event with almost 90 years of history. People save and plan all year for their weekend in the capital – it is not a spontaneous spend for most families.

Secondly, the NRL's profile in London is a tiny fraction of that of the NFL or NBA. Mark Evans, the Englishman who is CEO of the Melbourne Storm, once explained to me just how thoroughly American Football blitzed TV for half a decade before attempting to stage a major event in London.

Meanwhile, the little old NRL is hidden away on Premier Sports, a network using the content to sell subscriptions to

people who are already Rugby League fans. Does anyone "stumble across" the NRL on Premier? I doubt it.

As long as the NRL remains on Premier, I cannot see a respectable crowd showing up to watch a match at Wembley.

Thirdly, the NRL season kicks off a month into the Super League season. If a London match is to be successful, existing Rugby League fans based in the north would need to be enticed.

Surely we're not going to go into competition with ourselves. A Super League-NRL double header seems a sensible idea. We have to be careful not to devalue the product that is available locally.

As for moving the WCS, there's a similar problem – who is going to go through the gates? The NRL sides received A\$300,000 each to travel to the UK, from which they had to deduct their expenses.

If the games are played in a neutral venue, the Super League sides will have to be paid their expenses as well. At the moment, the games are played over a single weekend.

How many fans from Australia and England will travel to the Middle East for a single weekend when their teams are playing at home just a week or fortnight later?

The games in Greater Manchester and Merseyside this year did not all sell out. Do we expect them to do so in Abu Dhabi? Clearly we need a government with very deep pockets who doesn't care if there is a significant benefit to tourism.

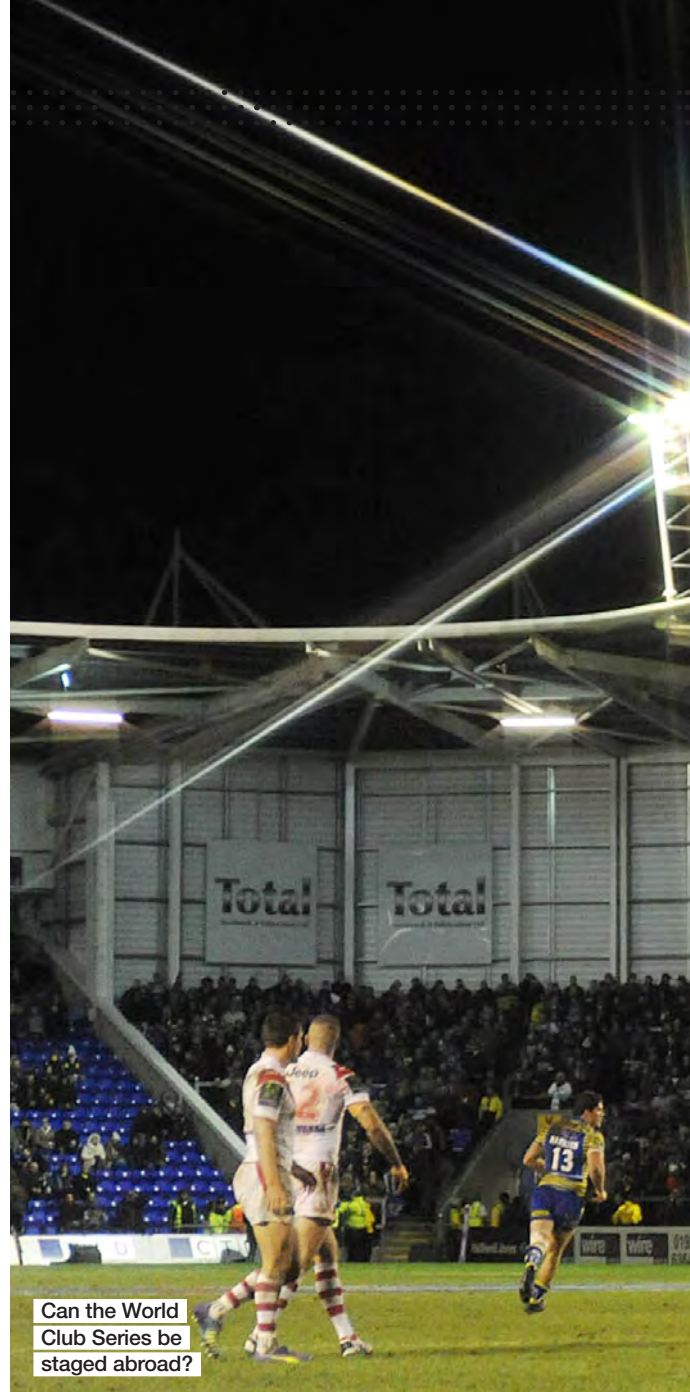
Does such a government exist?

I'm no naysayer but all these questions need to be asked.

SERIOUS MATTERS

While outsiders may not be able to see it, most of us are confident player behaviour has improved dramatically over the years, right?

The odd incident aside, our stars generally have a better understanding



and appreciation of their responsibilities to the community and the pitfalls of being public figures.

But recent events paint a worrying picture – of men who have left behind hijinks in favour of genuine criminal behaviour.

At the beginning of January we had former Hull star Jason Smith arrested on charges of trafficking cocaine.

A little over a month later, code hopper Karmichael Hunt was arrested on cocaine supply charges. Then Gold Coast's Jamie Dowling and Beau Falloon befell the same fate.

The developments were such a shock to the Titans that they had to move their training base away from a school because it was such a bad look.

LESS IS MORE

The comments of the new NRL head of strategy, Shane Richardson, about the



length of the Super League season are timely.

In case you missed it, Richo told colleague Ian Laybourn that the English philosophy of adding more games to make more money was out of step with how things are developing in the southern hemisphere.

The NRL season is about to get shorter, with stand-alone State of Origin fixtures and each country being permitted one mid-season international during that period.

But that won't work if Super League is jamming in more and more fixtures. "We want quality, not quantity, but that's not the case in the northern hemisphere, which is ridiculous," said Richardson.

The changes down under are likely to take place at the end of the current TV deal, for the 2017 or 2018 season. Will Super League be ready to make difficult calls at the same time?

ANOTHER FIRST

The dinner at the Imperial War Museum North to mark the first World Club Series (Rugby League loves the word "inaugural" doesn't it?) was one of the best functions I've been to.

Sure, it was weird having a twisted seven metre piece of steel from the World Trade Center in the middle of the room.

But generally it was a reminder of how special the relationship between the east coast of Australia and the north of England has become, thanks to Rugby League.

Kevin Walters joking with an earnest Denis Betts, Paul McGregor giving detailed answers to tactical questions every other NRL coach would brush off and Michael Maguire giving guarded answers worthy of Grand Final week all added to the anticipation surrounding the matches.

It's a fine line whether these functions are a waste of money or a show of strength and confidence. The international player of the year do in Brisbane last year, held in daylight with a number of stuff-ups, was definitely the former.

Brian Barwick was also very convincing before the WCS with his address comparing the tournament to the UEFA Champions League, conceding that in England there was scepticism about it for many years.

That scepticism remains in Australia. If Canterbury had beaten South Sydney in last year's Grand Final, I'm not entirely convinced they would have got on the plane to Langtree Park. ●

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LEAGUE TAKES OVER THE PARTY

THE ACRES OF EMPTY YELLOW

seats a fortnight later in Wellington was the best indication of the success of the NRL Nines in Auckland.

The capital city leg of the world rugby union sevens circuit used to sell out in minutes – people went not for the rugby, but for the party, and it was on every twenty-something's to-do list.

This year, they managed to attract just 18,000 spectators on each of the tournament's two days in a stadium which can accommodate over 40,000, leaving the New Zealand Rugby Union, the IRB and the stadium management making noises about how "one bad year" didn't spoil the long-term success of the event.

The party, it seems, has shifted to Auckland. For example, here's Wellington fan Katie Brown in the Sunday Star-Times newspaper. Brown, who had taken a big group of friends to the Sevens every year for seven years, this year went with her mates to the Nines and only went to the Sevens because she got a free ticket.

"We felt over it, like we had done it so many times, it was just the same thing over and over," she said. "No one was interested any more."

The Nines, if it stays in Auckland, could become League's biggest expansion weapon and certainly can help make the sport fashionable again.

TALE OF TWO CITIES

There's been lots of noise this month from the latest group pushing a Wellington NRL bid.

Most intriguingly was a deal struck with Christchurch club Celebration Lions to run a reserve-grade side in the NSW Cup if the Wellington bid succeeds.

Ignoring that the two cities are on separate islands, the Lions are an intriguing bunch – the newest premier club in the Canterbury competition, they are run by a born-again Christian church where members tithe some of their income, and have a reputation for spending big on recruiting players from more established clubs.

The church clearly has some financial

The Auckland Nines is out-shining its rugby union counterpart



clout, and reckon on spending \$1m a year on running the new team.

For the Wellington bidders, it would give them a decent claim on League talent outside Auckland and despite the strength of rugby union in Christchurch, the club comp there has turned up some decent talent, most recently new St George Illawarra prop Rulon Nutira but also David Kidwell, Lewis Brown and Setaimata Sa in recent years.

TV BONUS

Good news in Auckland, where the Auckland Rugby League has backed away from dumping its television deal with Maori Television and signed for another season, meaning it remains the only grassroots club competition in any New Zealand sport with its own weekly coverage.

WARRIORS BECOMING BIG HITTERS

The Warriors' offer of \$2m for two seasons for Cowboys back row Jason Taumalolo rather signals their serious

intent to finally lure an Australian-based star to the club.

The Taumalolo offer comes after decent chases for Kieran Foran and Trent Merrin (although both seem likely to go elsewhere) and Warriors chief executive Jim Doyle is now making noises about how the club are finally positioned to attract decent corporate third-party deals for their biggest players, which has always been an issue for the Warriors, who couldn't attract the extra cash of the big Sydney clubs.

With all that in mind, I'd ignore any speculation you might see about Manu Vatuvei going to union. The club are well aware of Vatuvei's drawing power – he and Shaun Johnson are constants on every bit of marketing they do – and his return to form in 2014 means he's unlikely to go anywhere.

On the Warriors, watch out for a stink with the city council to resurface. They have to start their season away from home, stymying plans for a 10-year anniversary of their first NRL game against Brisbane because the council booked an Eagles gig at Mt Smart. Legal action has been hinted at. ●

Aleksandar Markovic
with the MRL Super Cup
ahead of the 2014 final



WHISTLING AROUND EUROPE

PAUL ENGLISH discovers a man who is spreading the Rugby League gospel in a unique way

WHEN SERBIAN RUGBY LEAGUE player Aleksandar Markovic became aware of a chance to travel to Malta to play the game he loved, it didn't take him long to take up the opportunity.

In Malta he needed a job, but to get a job he needed first to have a work permit. To get a work permit, he needed a job! Once that Catch-22 situation was overcome Markovic departed Serbia - the first time that he had left the country of his birth. It was to lead to a new life, face new challenges and undertake a degree of travelling that he hadn't foreseen.

Markovic's opportunity to play in Malta came when Anthony Micallef, a man you could describe as 'Mr Malta Rugby League' knew that some experienced Rugby League players were required to enhance the development of the Maltese-raised players.

Gareth Barron, the former Gateshead Thunder player took up one opportunity and currently five Serbian players including an international are on the island. For Markovic, the first of the Serbians to arrive, a problem arose - but

one that he was happy to solve, such is his love for the game.

"I played against West Yorkshire Police and BARLA Lions but had to referee every domestic game," revealed Markovic.

Micallef, as well as being the national development manager and national coach, is also Malta's most experienced referee. In fact, with the island's other referee, Nadia Gosney, having started a family he was the only referee on the island.

But when injury forced him onto the touchline, that left Markovic - who had

ventured to Malta to play - quickly offering to officiate.

"If he wants me I'm here," was his response to becoming a match official on a more permanent basis.

"I arrived in Malta in February (2014) - the first time that I had left Serbia and almost straight away I was going to Bulgaria, Germany and the Czech Republic. All within two months!"

As Micallef explains a real opportunity now exists for Markovic to continue his development as a match official.

"He has the opportunity to go to Sweden this year for a Level Three referees course endorsed by the European Federation," said Micallef.

"There are some excellent opportunities arising in the game because European matches are being refereed by European officials. In fact in our match against Greece last year all the officials were from Serbia with Aleksandar being a touch judge.

"Refereeing opportunities nowadays are different, it's not just for people who come from Lancashire and Yorkshire."

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HOME TRUTHS

THE FRENCH WORD 'RÊVE' CAN

mean both dream and ambition. It's a noun used regularly in Rugby League circles, where a passionate ambition to see the game develop is sometimes inseparable from unrealistic dreams.

Such was the case with the so-called Dayan plan, commissioned towards the end of the presidency of Nicolas Larrat. This unlikely project, you may recall, was built on the notion that Elite 1 clubs would mushroom on the fields of established professional soccer clubs in unlikely places like Lens. The proposal – though in truth it never even got to that stage – was quashed by Larrat's successor, Carlos Zalduendo.

The Dayan plan was well-intentioned, based as it was on a desire to see French Rugby League break free of its present, confined mould. Now another project has surfaced, promoted by an Aude-based group called Objectif Ligue XIII, who want to see the top division expand to include teams based in big cities, former strongholds which still have a Rugby League presence, albeit it at a lower level. These include Bordeaux, Marseille, Montpellier and Lyon. The group has worthy aims – to give a new dynamic to the Elite 1 division, to increase media coverage and find new financial resources. There is also an air of desperation about their stance. They say that if nothing is done, the game will go to the wall.

After a meeting between the group and Federation officials, Zalduendo called the project "hot air", telling Midi-Olympique that it consisted of "total misinformation" and that, if it had had any substance, the Federation would have backed it.

Zalduendo countered that the governing body was working hard to ensure greater exposure for the top division, citing live streaming of certain matches (hit and miss, it has to be said) and an agreement with regional television to show both finals live.

He also pointed out that, far from failing to assist clubs, the Federation had stepped in to ensure the continuation in Elite 1 of Villeneuve and Avignon, and in Elite 2, Montpellier and St Gaudens.



Would the French domestic game benefit from a shake-up?

TOO MUCH TOULOUSE?

The merging of Elite 1 and 2 for phase two of the season proves, in the second year of the scheme, that the concerns of Objectif Ligue XIII are not groundless, since at the moment only Albi stand a realistic chance of boosting the Elite 1 division to nine teams next year.

The underlying fear, though, is that in the event – unlikely as it seems for now – that Toulouse got into Super League, the domestic competition would be even more devalued and famous old clubs like Carcassonne, Villeneuve and Avignon would be forever condemned to obscurity.

FRENCH EXPORTS

Amid all this, it can't be overlooked what an impact the Catalans have had. It's not simply that a French club is a real force in a fully professional League, but that young French players, whether ultimately successful or not, have a goal to aspire to.

There are still not enough of them to make the national side more successful, but an unexpected spin-off is that

French players are increasingly making themselves known on this side of the Channel, John Boudebza at Hull KR, Mickaël Simon at Wakefield and Rémy Marginet at Featherstone being three of the latest in a growing contingent.

MEDIA EXPOSURE

It's hard to draw conclusions about the Dragons' pre-season friendly against the Chevaliers Cathares.

A crowd of over 5,000 on a bitterly cold day was well below the 8,000 objective being bandied out. But the media exposure in this corner of France was considerable, the organisation of the event was a triumph and over a thousand guests attended the Legends Night which followed.

The hypothetical team of players from Aude and Roussillon clubs was selected thus: *Freddy Banquet; José Moya, Bernard Guilhem, Guy Delaunay, Hugues Ratier; Maxime Grésèque, Guy Alard; Delphin Castanon, Thierry Valero, Frédéric Teixido, Guy Laforgue, Marc Palanques, Jacques Moliner*. Coach: *Jacques Jorda*. ●

IT'S ALL KICKING OFF

WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE student game, I don't think I've ever known so much activity in Wales Rugby League at the start of a year, at least in the Super League era.

Normally it's just the two pro clubs, and maybe Valley Cougars, who are out in training and playing friendlies or Challenge Cup games but this year has seen a whole new revolution of growth for the game in Wales.

Up north, we have North Wales Crusaders who have been very active in arranging and playing friendlies. They were meant to take South Wales Scorpions in one game but difficulty in finding a venue for the date scheduled meant that had to be abandoned.

This meant the Scorpions have prepared for their cup campaigns with just the one game. They took on brand new club Cardiff City RL at Cardiff Arms Park recently and while they won 82-12, scoring 60 points in the second half, the most important aspect was the newly merged Cardiff club was up and running. Expect more from them soon.

The aforementioned Cougars have already played two competitive matches, winning then losing in the Ladbroke's Challenge Cup and failing to reach the lucrative third round as a result. It was a difficult away tie at Oulton Raiders anyway, but when you travel with just two subs, lose two players in the first 20 minutes then have one of your props play the whole of the second half with a dislocated shoulder, you're definitely up against it. They lost 48-0 but didn't ever give up trying.

The Cougars kick off their defence of the Conference South on March 21 against another new side from Wales, The Raiders RL. An offshoot of Gwendraeth Valley Raiders, who will stay playing in the Welsh Conference, they have secured Stebonheath Park in Llanelli, a ground that staged a number of WRU internationals many moons ago, as their home. They took on Aberystwyth University recently in their first ever game and won 72-8.

The other new side in Conference South are the experienced Torfaen Tigers who have competed regularly in the



North Wales and Scott Turner
are ready for the new campaign

Welsh Conference for over 10 years, winning the competition two years ago. They'll still be based at Cwmbran RFC and their first home game is against The Raiders on Sunday March 29.

Back up north we have the ambitious Flintshire Falcons who, after not playing at open age level last year, are back with a vengeance and have already faced Bangor University in a friendly match losing 52-36.

Falcons' under-18s are also back in training as are North Wales Crusaders' under-16s.

We've even held our first ever stand-alone coaching course where 14 candidates achieved Level One status.

So we have five teams ready for the big kick-off in March. On the 1st, Crusaders travel to West Hull while Scorpions visit Rochdale Hornets in the League One Cup.

A week later it is the Challenge Cup Third Round where both Welsh sides are at home, Scorpions to York and

Crusaders to community side Widnes West Bank – a side that Scorpions coach Mike Grady would have liked to have drawn away as his family live just round the corner!

Then on March 21, it's the big Conference South kick-off with that Welsh derby in Llanelli while Torfaen face a tough trip to Leicester Storm.

POSITIVITY FOR THE FUTURE

A number of players who will be turning out for the clubs mentioned above were honoured recently at the Millennium Stadium with a cap presentation.

Over 50 players from under-16s, 18s, 19s, 20s, student and community levels turned out with national coach John Kear coming down from Yorkshire for the evening to make the presentations.

It was wonderful to see so many Welsh born Rugby League players in one room and once again it gives massive hope for the future of the game here. ●

RUGBY LEAGUE CARES - GRANTS TARGET 2015

"... small but necessary grants to youth Rugby League clubs to provide equipment, kit and facilities."

← **LONDON SKOLARS'** Mini's team with Head Coach **JOE MBU**

MATTHEW CUSS, London Skolars' Youth Development and Academy Manager said: "With our 2014 grant, we are in the early stages of developing a women and girls section. It will give us an even greater reach into the community and enable us to offer a fully inclusive programme of Rugby League."



Individual club Rugby League **FOUNDATIONS** are guided and nurtured under the parent organisation **RUGBY LEAGUE CARES**.

JAMIE PEACOCK, former England Rugby League captain and a **TRUSTEE** of **RUGBY LEAGUE CARES** said: "It is vital to give our young players a good grounding in the game, so the new grants programme to develop primary leagues is a great move. I would urge every community club to apply for this support and set up primary league teams."



Rochdale Hornets' First Team player, **JAMES TILLEY** leads in training at the launch of Rochdale Hornets Sporting **FOUNDATION**.



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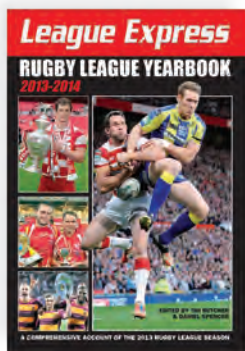
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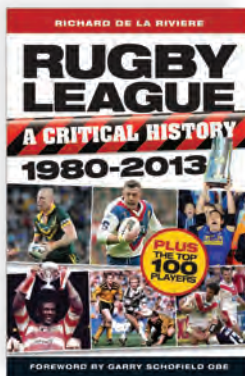
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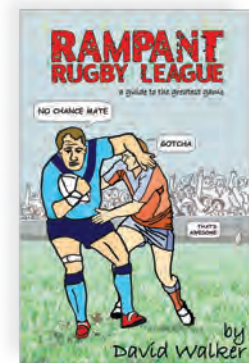
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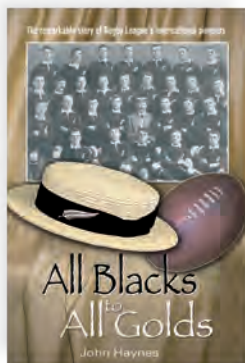
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NOT SO MAD DOCTOR

IT WOULD BE TOO EASY JUST TO dismiss the idea out of hand.

To regard it being even beyond the realms of our penchant for continual innovation - for that read inability to devote sufficient time and resource - and to marginalise it because of from whence it came.

It's safe to say that Dr Marwan Koukash is something of a butterfly when it comes to flitting between grand plans.

If the detail is in the red devil, at least the constant changing of the agenda keeps him newsworthy in media outlets the sport needs to cultivate.

But his British Bulldogs idea actually has legs.

Let's deal with the main objection first, that of diminishing Super League and relegating it to an effective feeder league for the glitter that would nestle above it.

Rugby League, especially in the areas it is traditionally geographically strongest, survives and thrives on local rivalries.

The Queensland League didn't die with the advent of Brisbane Broncos, North Queensland Cowboys and Gold Coast Titans, it ultimately thrived in its own right and now incorporates a team from Papua New Guinea.

Whatever the presence of the Bulldogs, it is highly unlikely to affect St Helens fans going to Wigan or Halifax speccies relishing the trip to Odsal.

If we accept our large minority sport status, then we have a limited spotlight, the Bulldogs concept is a bulb of higher wattage further shining down on what's below; a reflected glory.

Our star players are leaving anyway, either to the NRL or rugby union; one, principally, for the opportunity to be tested at a higher more intense level, the other mainly for the money.

This way, there is a chance of Joe Burgess still playing in the NRL but spending every other month in his own bed and the club that developed him being much more visible in the supply chain. What excites as much, though, is that a Harlem Globetrotters-type franchise, playing home games in venues to suit new and different markets, adheres exactly to the current vogue of wanting and needing more big events which will appeal to a new audience and raises overall visibility and profile.



Could Joe Burgess have been a star for a British Bulldogs NRL team?

A HARLEM GLOBETROTTERS-LIKE FRANCHISE, PLAYING HOME GAMES TO SUIT NEW AND DIFFERENT MARKETS WILL APPEAL TO A NEW AUDIENCE."

The NFL and NBA in London have shown that. The teams they bring over, irrespective of the British fans' personal favourites, draw sell-outs regardless.

You might be a Seahawks follower but you're not going to pass up the chance of seeing a Jaguar every now and then if it means elite sport on your doorstep.

So a Bulldogs game at West Ham, say, might get 30,000 new fans buying into the sport who were never destined to be Castleford season ticket holders and, if the matches were only played at a time when Super League wasn't - how about Saturday evening - then aficionados have the opportunity to split rather than transfer their allegiance.

Want to test if there really is a market in Canada? Take a Bulldogs game there, it would ease the travel logistics too which is also why Dubai could be so attractive.

The expanded World Club Series has shown that we can make our best international strides at club level first.

So what's in it for the NRL, why should they give Dr K one of their supposed two

new franchises that looks likely to come with their renewed TV deal in 2017, which could be worth a staggering A\$2billion?

Like the NFL, new markets. In a country of only 15 million with a third of that in the major cities, the Aussies are approaching league saturation point.

Perth and Wellington offer expansion in part but selling the brand - and on the back of it State of Origin - to a potentially massive cross-global audience ticks all the economic boxes.

As St George Illawarra chief executive Peter Doust said of the WCS, "For some time now I have had the view that developing an opportunity to position club brands internationally would be a worthwhile strategy."

On a much lesser scale, Ian Lenagan has stressed the importance of London as a market for Wigan as there is little more he can do to raise awareness of the Warriors in the town that bears their name. The British Bulldogs are its logical extension, and just imagine if Jonathan Thurston played for them. ●



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UP FOR THE CHALLENGE

LORRAINE MARSDEN catches up with a side set to make their Challenge Cup Final debut

EASTER SUNDAY WILL BE A DAY OF mixed emotions for York Ladies RLFC.

Not only will they be in celebratory mood due to the fact that they will be featuring in their first Challenge Cup Final, but the day is also likely to be tinged with some sadness that a very special person will not be there to see the feat.

Former coach Phillip Johnson, known by everyone at the club as OJ, passed away whilst on holiday shortly after the team won their last piece of silverware back in 2012.

Now, three years on, the team want to follow up that Challenge Cup Plate victory with a win in the competition Johnson would have next aimed for.

Now coached by Andy Fletcher and assisted by Wayne Lea, players at York understand that while it would be a nice tribute to Johnson to get their hands on the trophy, they cannot afford to use that as their sole motivation when they come up against Oulton Raidettes at Featherstone's Big Fellas Stadium.

"In January a cup draw is made and the winners of those games go on to play for the Challenge Cup, and the losers go into the Plate draw," explained York club captain Carly Hilton, a 28 year-old prop or centre.

"For the last four years we have made the Plate final but you always want to play in the Cup final and that is what we have always been aiming for. So now that we are here it feels like we have

taken the next step forward and there is a massive buzz around the place.

"We won the Plate in OJ's last season with us and it would be lovely if we could lift the Cup as well, as it is what he always wanted for us.

"But in the finals since we lost OJ we have said every year that we needed to go out there do it for him, but that has probably put too much pressure on us. A lot of us were really close to him and while we still miss him we are going out there and winning games for York Ladies and doing it for ourselves.

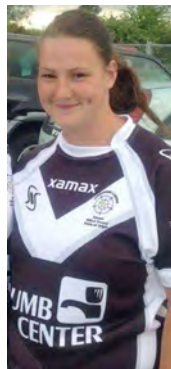
"There is a different feeling around the club this year. In our first final we lost narrowly then the year after that we got a great result against Huddersfield. But in the two years since then, we got absolutely hammered - last year by a really strong Bradford team and I don't think we have ever beaten them.

"But this year we have got a really big pack, we will have some players back fit in time for the final so generally we have a stronger squad this year.

"We are all getting on and playing really well as a team so there is a lot more belief this year that we can win the trophy."

UNBELIEVABLE RESULTS

Following a comprehensive 32-0 victory over Normanton in the semi-final, York went on to beat the then table-toppers Oulton 16-6 in the league, but they were



soon brought back down to earth when the Knights exacted their revenge with a 26-18 win the following week.

While they hope that the Raidettes will not do the same thing when they next meet, Hilton knows that they face a very tough game at Featherstone. But after some promising performances she knows confidence will be high in their camp. And now that their league campaign has finished, they can concentrate fully on getting themselves ready for the final.

"Going into the semi-final against Normanton we knew it would be a really tough game so we expected it to be close," added Hilton, who has also represented Yorkshire for the last two years.

"Throughout the game we couldn't quite believe what was happening, but we were just the better team on the day and that is what it came down to in the end.

"Before Christmas we'd had a few results where we could have won but we didn't, so we sat down as a team and had a good talk about that. We knew that we had to step things up in the second half of the season and when we played Normanton in the semi we did that and were a totally different side.

"Getting a result like that and then beating Oulton was a massive boost for the team because before that game the Raidettes hadn't lost this season. I did think we could do it and win those games but when you see the results written down on paper it does feel a bit unbelievable.

FAMILY AFFAIR

"We know it is going to be tough in the final and they will be looking for a bit of

“WE WON THE PLATE IN OJ’S LAST SEASON WITH US AND IT WOULD BE LOVELY IF WE COULD LIFT THE CUP AS WELL, AS IT IS WHAT HE ALWAYS WANTED FOR US.”



revenge but there is definitely a good feeling around the club at the minute.

"Now we just have to keep up with the big training sessions and then the night before the final we will all head out for a team meal. That was something OJ started when he was still here. It was probably to make sure we weren't out drinking with our friends but we have stuck to it and we just need to hope we aren't all struck down with food poisoning.

"There are always nerves coming up to a final and there are girls here that haven't played in a final yet, but results like give you that extra bit of confidence and gives you the belief you can do it."

As if the game wasn't already special enough, the Cup Final is set to be the club's 100th game after being set up again in 2009 by Johnson, who was also chairman at the New Earswick All Blacks club.

They have been in WARLA (Women's Amateur Rugby League Association) ever since, finishing in the top five in each season, and Hilton herself has



been with the club for all that time as well.

But that is not where her connections with the club end. Her sister Natalie also plays for the club, although she is currently sidelined after knee surgery last summer. Their mum Sasha also played for the club in its previous guise before it folded and Johnson brought it back to life.

So after seeing first hand just how much hard work has gone on into it, she knows that this latest achievement

is no more than the club deserves.

"It's going to be some way to celebrate that landmark and it promises to be a really good game," added Hilton who, between her rugby, her job as a sales assistant in a newsagents and being a mum, doesn't have much spare time.

"We have been in the league a long time now and it is nice that we are now getting recognised.

"We have always had support in finals from other teams and that looks like it is going to be the same this year. I also had a lot of text messages after the Normanton and Oulton wins so it is good

to see people talking about how well we are doing.

"It is also good for us that other teams are seeing us as a threat now rather than thinking 'oh it's just York Ladies'."

The Challenge Cup Final between York and Oulton will be played as part of a double header alongside The Challenge Cup Plate final between Fryston Warriors and Whitworth Spartans at Featehrstone on Sunday, April 5



2020 VISION

PAUL ENGLISH hears how Widnes' youth system is flourishing

SHANE ECCLES MAY NOT BE A

name that readily springs to mind to many Rugby League fans but he's a vital part of the youth set-up at Widnes Vikings where he coaches their under-19 side.

Eccles is now in his third season at the Vikings having joined from Wigan Warriors, starting as assistant coach of their under-18s before progressing to his present role.

"I worked with the scholarship team and was assistant to Peter Williams at Wigan before being offered a role with the Vikings," recalls Eccles.

"I started playing Rugby League at St Williams when I was five and they became Rose Bridge, I then played at St Pats before joining the Academy side at Leigh."

Eccles went to university to train as a PE teacher and when he finished, Wigan's John Winder offered him a position as a community coach which

meant he would go out to the local schools teaching the game.

"I also coached at Rose Bridge, where players like Joe Burgess, George Williams and Ryan Sutton all came through the age groups that I coached," he said.

Now Eccles is not only coaching a side coming of age, he - along with head of youth Phil Finney and assistants Neil Balshaw and Julian Hay - is seeing the fruits of a plan that was put into place three years ago.

"When the academy structure changed from being 18s and 20s to under-19s the club made a decision to develop a crop of young players that we could bring through, instead of going with older players," Eccles explained.

"So a lot of the lads in the top year of the academy this season have been with us for three years. When they started it was really tough for them, it was a young team, but they have developed through

that adversity of playing against older teams and the aim is for them now to step up into the first team."

HEALTHY BALANCE

That doesn't mean that the Vikings have brought through a full batch of players who will be too old for their under-19s academy side at the end of the current season. They have added to that squad each year as Eccles explains.

"For the first time since the under-19s started we now have a good balance. The first year we had a young team and last year it was mainly under-18s.

"This year it is a good mix, we have a 32-strong squad which is not top age or bottom age heavy. The aim is to recruit five to ten each year from the scholarship to the academy and hopefully, three years later, to the first team squad."

When players mature from the academy it can be a number of years

“WE DON'T WANT TO BE BORING AND PREDICTABLE. OUR STYLE COMES FROM THE WIDNES TEAMS FROM DIFFERENT ERAS.”

before they are ready for the week-to-week exposure of Super League. Loan and dual registration deals have their place in player development and whilst coaches in youth set ups generally have a good idea of which players will progress, a pat on the back every now and again to tell them that they are on the right tracks is always appreciated.

That's the case when the England Youth and Academy squads are announced - reward for the players and for the coaches at junior levels who have helped the players to progress.

“Each year we have had more players gain selection in the Academy and Youth squads, and hopefully that shows that we are heading in the right direction,” Eccles said. “That recognition shows that our players are doing something right and that our systems are working.

“Their selection is a not only a good indication that we are doing things right but we are encouraged and proud of

the lads that they are being rewarded for their hard work.”

CUMBRIAN PROMISE

The Vikings have been rewarded with three players in the England Youth squad and two in the Academy squad, including Vikings newcomer Brad Walker (circled left).

“Brad is a Cumbrian lad who was the Cumbria Academy last season,” Eccles said.

“We watched a number of their games because it's a pathway for lads in that area to Super League clubs. We thought that he had potential to become a Super League player and he's been with us all the way through pre-season. He's moved down to the area now and he's flourishing in our environment and hopefully he can progress further.

“We have a good arrangement with Cumbria Academy, when we played them recently our head of youth, Phil Finney, spoke with Dave Clark at Cumbria. They don't have the biggest of squads so we loaned them a few players just to make the game competitive.

“Instead of all our top end under-19s playing for us we evened it up and it gives us an insight into their character, - we wanted to see how the lads responded because when they go into the first team squad and they can go out on loan.”

Widnes are not playing their under-19s games ahead of the first team matches this season, instead playing them as stand-alone fixtures. With their coaches preaching an expansive style, exciting displays are very much on the agenda.

“We don't want to be boring and predictable,” Eccles added. “Our style comes from the Widnes teams from different eras, like the World Club Challenge winning team who threw the ball around and that's what we want to become. We want people to enjoy the game.”

The main thing that Eccles wants is to help Finney fulfil his desire to supplement the Vikings first team squad with home-grown players. “We want to provide 20 players to the first team squad by 2020.” ●



INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

In last month's edition we picked out four players to watch this season; Sam Wilde and Oliver Gildart being two of the four.

They represented England last year but are now too old for the England Academy side, but we're pleased to report that Jordan Lilley and Jake Spedding – the two others we picked out to keep an eye on - have both been selected in the 2015 squad.

The full England academy squad is: Macauley Davies, Josh Ganson, Jack Higginson, Jake Moore, Kyle Shelford, Jack Wells (all Wigan Warriors), Frederick Bailey, Morgan Knowles, Jake Spedding, Aaron Smith (all St Helens), Ash Golding, Sam Hallas, Jordan Lilley (all Leeds Rhinos), Matty English, Liam Johnson (both Huddersfield Giants), Callum Lancaster, Harry Tyson Wilson (both Hull FC), Harvey Livett, Morgan Smith (both Warrington Wolves), Ryan Ince, Bradley Walker (both Widnes Vikings), Jordan Crowther, Max Jowitt (both Wakefield Trinity Wildcats), Chris Smith (Hull KR),

The England Youth squad has also been named: Caine Barnes, Samuel Kibula, Declan O'Donnell, Oliver Partington, Oliver Russell, James Worthington (all Wigan Warriors), Harry Newman, Dyson Nicholson, Mikolaj Oledzki, Cameron Smith, Alex Young (all Leeds Rhinos), Chris Brown, Owen Harrison, Elliott Windley (all Hull KR), Owen Farnworth, Danny Walker, Liam Walsh (all Widnes Vikings), Jon Kirby, Jake Wardle (both Huddersfield Giants), Will Dagger, Will Oakes (both Wakefield Trinity Wildcats), Jacques O'Neill (Castleford Tigers), Kevin Brown (St Helens), Alex Tankard (Warrington Wolves).

CODE WARS

I THINK I KNOW SHAUN EDWARDS

just about well enough to be certain that he would not go around 'dissing' the sport that made him.

Not unless there was some advantage to be gained in the game where he currently earns his corn, t hat is.

In his capacity as assistant coach with Wales, Shaun complained in advance about England's use of decoys 'running illegal Rugby League lines' to obstruct defenders.

It's the same debate we've been having for the last couple of years and, if it's now union's turn to tie itself in knots over the same issue I'll be delighted.

The influence of the codes on each other is not all one way, though. For instance, did you clock Joel Tomkins, not that long returned from the Dark Side, in Wigan's season-opener against Widnes?

When a series of skirmishes broke out at the end, Tomkins entered, stage left, apparently intent on joining the main scrap. Having weighed up the odds in that one, though, he spun through 180 degrees, set off in the opposite direction and flattened the unsuspecting Cameron Phelps.

What was that all about? I can only conclude that he was running an illegal rugby union line with which we are not yet familiar.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT SORT OF

lines Sam Burgess was running in his international debut for the England Saxons against the Irish Wolfhounds.

I do know what his body language was saying. Something along the lines of 'What the hell am I doing here?'

Trying to get involved in such static patterns of play presented him with insoluble problems.

He made mistakes alright, with Stuart Barnes gleefully keeping a count. He threw a couple of ill-advised passes, but they might not have been such a lousy idea if anyone had shown the slightest interest in getting onto the end of them.

Sam was at least trying to play a bit of rugby.

AFTER WHAT SEEMED LIKE MANY

months of inactivity, Rugby League suddenly leapt out of hibernation with



Joel Tomkins prepares to use his RU experience

WHAT WAS ALL THAT ABOUT? I CAN ONLY CONCLUDE THAT HE WAS RUNNING AN ILLEGAL RUGBY UNION LINE WITH WHICH WE ARE NOT YET FAMILIAR."

the Auckland Nines last month.

It was like a challenge to those of us bemoaning our withdrawal symptoms. Missing your League, eh? Let's see just how much you can take.

It was wall-to-wall on Premier Sports and it bore out what I have long argued about Nines – that they offer a far more rounded introductory experience to league than Sevens.

For one thing, there's a role for the big man down the middle. The better sides, notably the eventual winners, South Sydney, knew how to use the Big Boppers to best effect.

This applied particularly to George Burgess, who has been hinting that he might be the third of the brothers to leave the Bunnies.

He was running a line that would be pretty effective in either code; straight over the top of the would-be tackler. Also live from Auckland and filling in a few of the gaps were the women's games between New Zealand and Australia.

How good were they? Very good indeed. I've always found women's Rugby League eminently watchable, but if this was typical, it has taken huge strides forward since I last sat down and concentrated on it.

EVERYBODY HAS NOTICED IT AND I'm not going to deny it.

There is a keener sense of anticipation about this season than there has been for years.

That applies not just to Super League, but the launch of the Championship season had a similar feel-good vibe about it.

The top brass from the RFL were not far off dancing on the tables and chanting 'Told You So!'

Old curmudgeon as I am, I must sound one word of caution.

Part of the euphoria was attributable to the game's liberation from the licensing system, with which just about everyone was bored stiff. And that, of course, was the last Big Idea. ●

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